USING MARGARET CARR'S LEARNING STORIES FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

SPECTRUM DISORDER: PARENTAL AND TEACHER FEEDBACK

by

Jessica Similien, Bachelor of Arts, Ryerson University 2007

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ABSRACT

Margaret Carr's Learning Stories for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Parental and teacher feedback.
Master of Arts, 2017
Jessica Similien
Program of Early Childhood Studies,
Ryerson University

This study explored the potential of Margaret Carr's (2001) learning stories framework to assess the learning of children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Parents of four children with ASD who were enrolled in a pre-school program undertook writing learning stories of their children at home over a two-week period. During the same time period, a teacher who is also the researcher in this study, created learning stories for these children in the pre-school classroom. At the end of the two-week period, the parents and the teacher/researcher met to compare and discuss their stories and use the information to create individual program planning (IPP) goals for the four children. Findings indicate that these discussions helped to clarify the children's behaviours and actions resulting in the development of more meaningful IPP goals. All the parents felt their participation in the process to have greatly benefited their child's programming. However, questions arose regarding whether it was the actual format of the learning stories themselves, or whether it was the dispositional attributes in Carr's framework which resulted in rich discussions.

Keywords: ASD Spectrum Disorder, Learning Stories, Assessment, Learning Dispositions

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my incredible daughter Ireal. You are the reason I live, breath and strive

to always be better. You will educate and change the world with the care and compassion

youfeel and show towards others. You are the most inclusive, open-minded child I have ever

known. Your energy and positivity is inspirational. I love who you are and thank you for

continuing to teach me every day. You are the light of my life Irie, Mama loves you, Bestie!

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Chapter I: Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurological condition that affects children in a variety of different ways. It is described as "a set of heterogeneous neurodevelopment conditions characterized by early-onset difficulties in social communication and unusually restricted, repetitive behaviour and interests" (Lai, 2014, p. 896). There are increasing numbers of children being diagnosed with ASD. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that 1 in 68 children born are diagnosed with ASD in the United States (CDC, 2016). While Canada does not track prevalence of ASD, ASD Speaks Canada (2014) notes that ASD is currently the most common category of exceptionality in young children. As a result, a higher number of children with ASD are being enrolled into early learning settings (Simpson, 2010).

In Ontario, all government approved and licensed early childcare and pre-school programs follow guidelines set out in, *How does learning happen? Ontario's pedagogy for the early years* (2014). Professionals in those settings are expected to continuously engage in understanding what children know and are learning in order to plan responsive and appropriate curriculum. Thus, documentation, evaluation, and assessment of children's learning is an inherent aspect of working and teaching in early learning environments. Current practices favour the use of authentic assessment in early learning settings and include the use of portfolios, anecdotal and running record observations. There are also a number of standardized checklists for charting the development and growth of young children. For the purposes of this study, assessment is defined as, "'the process of gathering information about children from several forms of evidence, then organizing and interpreting that information"'(McAfee, Leong, & Bodrova, 2004 as cited in McAfee, Leong, & Bodrova, 2016, p. 2). In keeping with this definition, it is understood that both authentic and standardized assessment practices can work

together to generate insight into a child's level of functioning. However, it is the premise of this study that all current practices (both authentic practices and standardized tests) are designed for, and normed on typically developing children. There is a substantial amount of literature discussing the inadequacy of these approaches for children with exceptionalities. More recent literature extends these discussions to include children with ASD and notes that current practices (particularly standardized assessments) are even more problematic for this group of children. The purpose of the current study is to explore the use of Margaret Carr's (2001) learning stories framework as a possible assessment format for children with ASD in a pre-school program. There is limited research on current assessment tools being used to measure the growth and development of children with ASD in early learning settings. Given the increasing enrollment of children with ASD in early childhood learning environments, there appears to be a need for the development of appropriate assessment tools for use with children diagnosed with ASD. Thus, there appears to be a gap in the literature with regards to assessing the on-going learning, interests, progress and challenges of children diagnosed with ASD in inclusive early learning programs.

Theoretical Framework

Theories that address how and what children learn shape and influence assessment practices in education (Keilty, Larocco & Casell, 2009). A teacher's understanding of the way in which children learn affects that teacher choice in the assessment practices they use (Edgar, 2012). This study uses the new sociology of childhood as a theoretical construct from which to view the assessment, learning and development of children with ASD. The new sociology of childhood views children as social actors and active participants in their learning experiences, with the ability to construct their own world and reality. Children are no longer viewed as

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dependents who just absorb information, instead they interpret and contribute to socialization and learning experiences (Matthews, 2007). The new sociology of childhood does not privilege ages and stages of development, but instead looks at how children observe and borrow adult culture to create peer culture. Matthew (2007) affirms that "the 'new' sociology of childhood emphasizes that children are social actors who are capable of reflexivity" (p. 324). This means that children are active agents and participants in their own learning experiences. In this regard, children are considered competent beings who are able to translate their social experiences and act on those understandings. However, it must be understood that the new sociology of childhood incorporates children's participation in the research. This study does not directly capture children's voices through participation in the study. Rather, it seeks to capture their voices through descriptive observations through learning stories. In this sense, the constructivist aspect of the new sociology of childhood influences the approach used in this study. The assessment construct chosen for this study is situated within the new sociology of childhood. Margaret Carr's (2001) learning stories framework incorporates children's priorities and their interests by observing different learning dispositions and specific areas of interest with an emphasis on the learner's understanding. That understanding is also constructed together by the child and the teacher.

Marshall (2016) stresses the need to incorporate children's priorities into education so that their voices and perspectives can be clearly involved in setting educational values and policies that directly affect children. What children consider to be a priority should also be reflected in the curriculum and learning environment. This researcher believes that Carr's framework, with its emphasis on learning inclinations or dispositions and the actions of being ready, willing, and able to learn is capable of assessing children with ASD by incorporating their

voices and individual experiences so that appropriate curriculum can be developed for them. Furthermore, the researcher believes that Carr's emphasis on the contextual aspect of the learning situation through the "dispositional milieu" is critical in capturing a more holistic and accurate picture of a child with ASD and how they function, even that of a child who does not normally engage in social interactions. Matthews (2007) further states,

> . . . the 'new' sociology of childhood advocates documenting the actual
> representations of children used in different social locations and settings. In short,
> statements about children are suspect if they are not grounded in a social context but
> instead claim to describe children in general. (p. 226)

Margaret Carr's model aims to eliminate assessing development in categorical forms and creates a template that focuses, instead, on children's learning dispositions and their inclination to act on those dispositions. Thus this study accepts this tenet and seeks to examine whether Carr's model is appropriate and viable to use when working with children that have ASD.

Chapter II: Literature Review

The following section will provide an overview of assessment practices in use with young children. It will discuss the appropriateness of those assessment practices for children with exceptionalities and those with ASD in particular. Also discussed is the role of the IPP and its link to assessment for children with exceptionalities and the use of a family-centered alternative approach when working with children who have ASD.

The Landscape of Assessment Practices

The interest in studying, assessing and observing children did not exist until the late 1800s. Before the 1800s, children were not considered worthy of study and were viewed in

society as small, less capable adults (Siegel, 1982). In the late 1800s Stanley Hall challenged this notion and, through the use of questionnaires, diaries and observations, he began to note how children developed differently than adults, both physically and cognitively (Thorndike, 1901). This initiated the beginning of the Child Study Movement (Thorndike, 1901). It was during this time that society as a whole became more interested in trying to understand how children developed. This influenced a rise in the field of developmental psychology and behaviourism, where the approach used to assess children emphasized the use of standardized testing (Brooks-Gunn and Johnson, 2006). Standardized tests and the legacy of behavioral psychology currently dominate assessment practices for all children, especially for young children with exceptionalities. Alternatively, authentic assessment practices such as evaluating children's abilities and interests in their natural setting should characterize the field of early childhood education as it is considered best-practice when working with all children (Bagnato, 2014).

Standardized assessment tools.

The majority of assessment tools used to assess children today are more often based on deficit models that focus on comparing children's results to pre-determined standardized norms (Bagnato, 2005). Research indicates that the most common reasons for assessing young children today is for the purpose of assigning a diagnosis or for evaluating skill acquisition (Neisworth, 2004). Such summative models commonly focus on the end product, not taking into account individual differences, environmental factors or the process involved during the assessment (Bagnato, 2005; Carr, 2001). The limitations of conventional testing are being recognized within the field of early childhood studies. Numerous problems arise when using conventional, theoretically based assessment tools that inaccurately measure a child's abilities and development, often resulting in problematic placements and questionable service allocation for

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children with exceptionalities (Neisworth, 2004). Bagnato (2014) notes that when assessments

are conducted in environments unknown to children, results produced will be a misrepresentation

due to the fact that the child may have been uncomfortable and unable to perform naturally

because of unfamiliar surroundings and people. Standardized tests that compare results to

typically developing norms are not appropriate for use with young children and often produce

extremely negative outcomes when used with children who have exceptionalities. Results from

these conventional tests have often been referred to as 'the mismeasure of children' (Bagnato,

2005; Neisworth and Bagnato, 2004). This problem increases when assessing children with

ASD. Magiati and Howlin (2001) note that,

> Although a variety of cognitive tests is available for assessment in the preschool years,
> these have been developed primarily for children whose developmental progress follows
> the normal stages. They are not designed for children whose development is markedly
> delayed or uneven, as is the case in ASD. (p. 399)

Standardized tests can be problematic for children, however, this problem is magnified for

children with ASD. Magiati and Howlin, (2001) also comment that while many children with

ASD or children who elicit autistic characteristics may have the cognitive understanding to

answer the questions, they may not encompass the ability to perform the task asked of them due

to the nature of the testing method. Such assessment tools focus on the end product or on a

specific skill, not taking into consideration the process experienced by the individual, or how the

environment could have influenced the results. These conventional, convergent, deficit models

look to identify what is developmentally missing or different by comparing a child's results to

what is expected to be the norm for that age (Bagnato, 2005; Carr, 2001; Magiati & Howlin,

2001).

Magiati and Howlin (2001) also state that developmental tests are designed for typically developing children and that assessment categories often focus on testing children and comparing their results to age-based expected norms formulated on predetermined, outdated ages and stages. Magiati and Howlin (2001) strongly suggest moving away from using standardized assessment tools and cognitive tests on children with ASD as they do not accurately reflect the child's current level of development nor do these tests correctly depict the developmental gains and progress of children with exceptionalities. Because of the common difficulty with communication and issues with socialization experienced by individuals with ASD, standardized tests are not appropriate to use when assessing their development. It is especially important to have appropriate assessment tools when measuring the progress of the child to examine and reflect on the strategies being used. The type of assessments, as well as when and where they are administered, can actually effect the IQ scores of children with ASD. Magiati & Howlin's, (2001) study looked at the results of developmental assessments and test scores of children with ASD by analyzing two standardized models, the Merrill-Palmer and the Bayley (Magiati & Howlin, 2001). The authors found that the scores on the different tests varied greatly for the children with ASD. For example, the Merrill-Palmer test resulted in children attaining higher IQ results then the Bayley template. Magiati and Howlin (2001) suggest that this could be due to the fact that "different skills are emphasized in the different tests" (p. 403). Another issue with the tests that was examined concerned the scores presented are based on information provided by the parents instead of actual interactive observations. After conducting this study, suggestions were made for assessing the on-going development of children with ASD. Some of the suggestions included ensuring that planning does not solely rely on IQ test scores, using additional assessment tools with standardized models and being consistent with the method of

assessment (Magiati & Howlin, 2001).

Understanding and accounting for different learning styles, varying rates of development and environmental influences is extremely important when assessing children's learning and is especially imperative when assessing the development of children with ASD (Claxton & Carr, 2004). Children with ASD often learn differently than typically developing children and commonly experience challenges when communicating, following instruction and/or performing specific tasks. Using standardized assessments makes it difficult to accurately chart the development of a child with ASD and to set developmental goals (Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004). Barton, Lawrence, and Deurloo (2012) indicate that children with ASD often have specific strengths in areas of development, a concept that needs to be acknowledged and accounted when assessing and setting goals for children with ASD.

Learning stories.

Learning stories, a concept and approach coined by Margaret Carr (2001), are a type of in-depth observation that take the form of a narrative story. Carr (2001) began her thinking about learning stories by noting the difference between what she refers to as her folk model of assessment and her new, alternative model. She states, "An assumption that I was making twenty years ago was that assessment sums up the child's knowledge or skill from a predetermined list" (Carr, 2001, p. 2). This approach and method of testing is referred to as convergent assessment, based on standardized norms and is often formed and deeply influenced by cultural assumptions and beliefs (Carr, 2001). Alternatively, what she views as divergent assessments focus on the importance of the learner understanding and being involved in the learning process. This alternative model is completed with the student and the teacher collaborating together to develop meaningful outcomes through interactive, hands on,

documented observations (Carr, 2001). In this alternative model the context and the learning are inseparable and the environment and socio-cultural milieu become an important aspect of the learning story. Understanding and recognizing different learning styles and assessing children's learning dispositions are important aspects of learning stories. Learning dispositions include many different aspects of a child such as previous knowledge and accomplished skills, commitment and determination, environment and social surroundings, and motivation (Carr, 2001). While the framework has a number of categories and terms, it is understood that they can be adapted in different environments.

One of the purposes for developing the learning stories approach is for meaningful information sharing between children, teacher's, educational professionals and parents to understand and communicate about the children's development and to set developmental goals for both the child and the program (Carr, 2001). The observational learning stories tell a narrative about important aspects of the child's interests, learning experiences and challenges, which are then further discussed. Carr's learning story model states that learning is not an individual act separate from the environment or the social context of the learning situation. In Carr's (2001) model, the learner is viewed as always being in action within the context and environment. Carr (2001) affirms that:

> This viewpoint derives mainly from Lev Vygotsky's (1978) notion of 'mediated action'. It takes a view of learning that focuses on the relationship between the learner and the environment, and seeks ways to define and document complex reciprocal and responsive relationships in that environment. (p. 5)

Relationships between the child and the environment, relationships between the child and the teacher, and relationships between children are at the core of both Vygotsky's and Carr's work.

The learning story model is based on child-centered observations which are structured as a story and then further analyzed. The observations are categorized using learning dispositions which include; taking an interest, being involved, persisting with difficulty, communicating with others, and taking responsibility (Carr, 2001). Learning dispositions, rather than developmental goals are regarded as outcomes in Carr's model and they outline how children learn and become physically and socially involved within their environment. For Carr "Dispositions are a very different type of learning from skills and knowledge. They include skills and knowledge, but can be thought of as "habits of mind, tendencies to respond to situations in certain ways" (Carr, 2001, p. 21). The child's participation in each of the five domains of dispositions are then analyzed according to the actions of whether the child is ready, willing and able to learn in each of the listed areas; taking an interest, being involved, persisting with difficulty, communicating and taking responsibility (Carr, 2001). Learning dispositions refer to the type of learner a child is and how they are predisposed to learning.

Learning Dispositions

This section of the literature review will define and describe the different learning dispositions used in the observational tools made for this study. 'Taking an interest' refers to the objects or people that are of interest to the child and often work as motivators to involve the child in an activity or a social setting (Carr, 2001). Documenting and using the child's interests can often encourage the child's involvement and participation. Another learning disposition is 'being involved', which Carr relates to the child's well-being. This area of focus relates to a child's readiness, willingness and ability to get involved in an activity, situation or social setting (Carr, 2001). 'Persisting with difficulty' is the next learning disposition which involves a child's enthusiasm towards trying something new, or continuing through a difficult experience by

making mistakes and problem solving (Carr, 2001). 'Communicating' with others is the next learning disposition and describes a child's willingness to contribute their ideas and feelings to a conversation. This disposition can involve multiple forms of communication, such as singing, dancing, rhyme, and can look very different for each child depending on the context and the social setting (Carr, 2001). For example, children that are musically inclined may be seen participating and communicating during music circle but not during other times of the day. The last learning disposition to be defined is 'taking responsibility'. Taking responsibility involves a child's inclination to take care of objects, take responsibility for individual behaviour and personal items, and making fair and just decisions (Carr, 2001). These are the five learning dispositions listed and used on the observational template for this study

According to Carr (2001), one must have positive dispositions to learning for learning to occur. This supports the idea that fostering a child's learning dispositions moves away from the banking model of education and instead creates an opportunity for individuals to enjoy learning for life (Nyland & Alfayez 2012). Nyland and Alfayez (2012) note that, "The *learning story* method is considered more comprehensive than previous observation and assessment methods as they capture the context of the learning environment and are therefore considered to have more depth than an anecdote or running record" (p. 394). A child's disposition to learn largely depends on the nature of the situation and the context of the experience. To enhance and maximize learning in the classroom, teachers should assess students by using assessments that focus on the development of an individual's disposition to learn instead of on skill set and knowledge (Nyland & Alfayez 2012).

This concept of using learning stories as an observational assessment tool is becoming more prevalent internationally. Nyland and Alfayez, (2012) researched the outcomes of using

learning stories in New Zealand, Australia and Saudi Arabia. The findings indicate that learning

stories based on children's learning dispositions are culturally sensitive and take into account

aspects of local culture (Nyland & Alfayez, 2012).

Carr and Claxton (2002) discuss the importance of fostering and developing positive

learning dispositions in young children in early learning environments and they state:

> Without some systematic way of keeping track of students' progress in this regard, it is
> all too easy for parents', teacher's and students' attention to be captured by the traditional
> goals of achievement and to lose sight of the more slippery, but even more important,
> development of dispositions (Carr & Claxton, 2002, p. 16).

It is very easy to fall back into a convergent mentality where the focus is no longer on the

learning dispositions (Carr &Claxton, 2002).

Teacher's and researchers have indicated that learning stories are a powerful and

informative way to provide a holistic approach to observing children's strengths and interests

(Karlsdottir & Garoarsdottir, 2010). When preschool teachers in Iceland were interviewed after

using a learning story framework based on analyzing children's learning dispositions, it was

reported that teachers were better able to focus on students' positive attributes, strengths and

interests (Karlsdottir & Garoarsdottir, 2010). This research study indicates that by using

Margaret Carr's learning stories framework "…preschool teachers may become more open

towards identifying children's strengths and competencies rather than focusing on their

'problems' and thus gain better insight into children's capabilities" (Karlsdottir & Garoarsdottir,

2010, p. 265). The benefits of using learning stories to assess children opened up the opportunity

to better know and understand each child (Karlsdottir & Garoarsdottir, 2010).

A commonly discussed benefit of using the learning story approach is the room it offers to involve and incorporate the opinions and experiences of parents, teachers and researchers (Claxton & Carr, 2004). Having a team working together creates more of a holistic approach to understanding development and to creating curriculum plans. Carr (2001) outlines the importance of incorporating parents into the educational experiences of children. When parents are involved with reading and recording learning stories, they have the opportunity to report the observations important to them and reflect on the learning stories written by the child's teacher. Carr (2001) reiterates the excitement of parents who thoroughly enjoy reading the classroom based learning stories written about their child. Parental involvement has been positive and parents report experiencing more consistency between the home and school environments. Carr (2001) states that one parent indicated that using the learning story framework encouraged more dialog to take place between her and her child at home and allowed for her to expand on the school curriculum in the home.

Leach and Duffy (2009) discuss the importance of parental involvement in the educational and developmental planning of children with ASD. Children with ASD are all affected differently, making it imperative to have an individualized approach for learning (Leach and Duffy, 2009). It is also extremely important to share any observations taken and any plans put in place with the child's teachers. Leach and Duffy (2009) explain the many benefits that exist when the parents of children with ASD are incorporated and actively involved with developing an individualized program plan (IPP). When working with children that have ASD, Ruble and Dalrymple (2002) note that, "The consultation framework, which includes parents and teachers, not only has advantages over other approaches but also has been reported to be the

most effective approach" (p.76). This point outlines the importance of teacher's and families of children with ASD working collaboratively.

Blair, Lee, Cho and Dunlap (2011) further outline the importance of parents being involved in the education of a child with ASD, however, they stress the importance of parents being involved through the planning of IPPs. Research also shows that both locally and internationally, there is a lack of parental involvement in the development of IPPs for children with exceptionalities (Blair, Lee, Cho and Dunlap, 2011). In a study that focuses on individualizing interventions for children who have ASD it was found by Barton, Lawrence, and Deurloo (2012) that having parents and families involved with individual program planning has the best overall results and outcomes for children with ASD.

Authentic assessments versus learning stories.

Standardized, convergent methods of assessing learning are being criticized for not accurately depicting a child's level of development and academic achievement (Bagnato, 2005). Stated throughout the literature is the importance of assessing children with extra support needs using alternative assessment tools to replace deficit based models that do not accurately depict development and do not incorporate parental and family involvement when planning for and supporting children with ASD in particular. Neisworth and Bagnato (2004) state that the main reason for assessing young children is to address concerns or suspicions about atypical development. Neisworth and Bagnato (2004) further believe that, "Only authentic or alternative, observational assessment forms that meet current recommended practice standards of the division for early childhood and the National Association for the Education of Young Children…should be promoted in the early childhood fields." (Neisworth and Bagnato, 2004, p. 199). The available literature on assessment tools indicates that authentic assessments are

considered to be best practice when working with children that have exceptionalities (Bagnato, Goins, Pretti-Frontczak and Neisworth, 2014). Neisworth and Bagnato (2004) define authentic assessment as "…the systematic collection of information about the naturally occurring behaviours of young children and families in their daily routine." (p. 204). In a study done by Neisworth and Bagnato (2004), 7000 children were tested by 250 early childhood psychologists across 33 different States. When using conventional testing, 60% of the children would not have been able to take the tests because of the restrictive nature of the template being used. Once the professionals began using an authentic alternative, 90% of the children were able to take part in the testing and as a result were placed in appropriate early intervention programs. Also reported in the study was the importance of parental observations as a key factor to help assess a child's development. The study concluded that developmental assessments should be done using active observations and family centered approaches, moving away from traditional methods of laboratory style testing in un-naturalistic settings (Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004).

Research supports the use of authentic assessments as an alternative approach to assessing young children, especially for children with exceptionalities, however, it has been reported that even authentic assessments have their drawbacks in that they are often deficit based and completed with developmental standards in mind (Howell, Bigelow, Moore, & Evoy, 1993). Carr's (2001) method problematizes the existing methods of assessing young children and offers an alternative observational approach called learning stories which are based on fostering and assessing children's learning dispositions. The learning story structure and framework has been used as a guide for the observational template created for this research study.

Purpose of the Study

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This study addresses two issues in the field of education for young children identified with ASD. The first concerns the lack of appropriate classroom methods for documenting and evaluating the learning of this group of children. Current evaluation and documentation methods in early childhood education for children with disabilities in general, are deficit-based and emphasize what children cannot do; because of this, goals, objectives and strategies for the child's learning are often solely remedial and very narrow in scope. The second issue is the need for meaningful collaboration between parents and teachers in creating an Individual Program Plan (IPP) for a child with ASD. While parents are often invited to contribute to the creation of an IPP for young children with exceptionalities, this is critical for parents of children with ASD for whom consistency in teaching strategies and care needs to be maintained between the school and the home. This qualitative study addresses these two issues by adapting and implementing an assessment template based on Margaret Carr's learning stories framework; this is a multi-dimensional, strength-based template of potential use to teacher's in helping develop more appropriate goals for children with ASD. It also has the potential to invite parents to be partners in the documentation of their child's learning and in the creation of an IPP. This study incorporates a) observations of the child during school hours in the context of the child's preschool classroom; an assessment template for documenting the child's interests and development has been created and was used during this phase by the researcher (who is also a a teacher in the preschool classroom), b) observations of the child's behavior at home by one or both parents using a documentation template in lay terms, which aligns with the one used in the classroom.

Chapter III: Methodology

Research Design

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This study used Margaret Carr's (2001) learning story framework to investigate its applicability for use with children diagnosed with ASD. Two observational/learning story tools were created for this study. The template for use by the parents (see Appendix B) was modified from Carr's (2001) model in order to make it easier for parents to use at home in the context of home activities, while the teacher/researcher's template (see Appendix A) was adapted to include curriculum categories. For example, the category of "belonging" was labelled "playing with objects or toys" in the parent template. However, the descriptors in column two of the template were more similar than different in both tools. For example, on the teacher's template, in the column of "finding something of interest", the word to elicit the observation used is "things", whereas for the parents it was extended to "toys and objects" to ensure parents' more accurate understanding of what was meant to be documented. It is also important to point out that the teacher's template had columns allowing for noting "backgrounding" and "foregrounding" information; it was decided to omit this for parents so as not to complicate their understanding of the template. The "foregrounding" column is for documenting the learning story observation where the "backgrounding" column provides space for insight as to what the observation indicates. Completing observations with backgrounding and foregrounding in mind were significant in allowing the teacher/researcher to later analyse the observations.

Descriptors were added to the dispositional column to guide both the teacher/researcher and the parents in looking for specific areas. However the parent template used simpler wording. Both the teacher/researcher and the parents took observations for a two week period (parents were given a template for each week). While parents took the observations in the context of the home environment, the teacher/researcher conducted her observations during class time when the teacher/researcher was not in a lead position in the class, and was able to observe the child. This

meant that at the time the learning story was written, the teacher/researcher was not leading a lesson or experience for the children but was still an active teacher at the time. The high student/teacher ratio in this inclusive, preschool setting allowed considerable time for the teacher/researcher to take observations. The teacher/researcher's observations for this study were in lieu of observations that would have been done in the course of the program in any event. After completion of the observations, the parents and the teacher/researcher met in order to create an IPP for the child. This discussion was recorded using an audio recording device. At the end of the conversation, the parents answered questions about the process in which they had participated and this was also recorded on the same audio recorder as previously used.

Recruitment

The primary investigator (PI) for this study is also a full time teacher in an inclusive preschool setting with children who have ASD. The research was completed with families whose children attend the pre-school program. The study was approved by Ryerson University's Ethics Board and the Director of the pre-school setting used in this study. A total of four parents returned signed forms and agreed to participate in the study.

In order to mitigate any potential conflict of interest (the PI is also the teacher in the School), recruitment began by placing all the names of the children diagnosed with ASD in the program (20 names) in a container. The PI's co-worker (also an early childhood educator) chose eight names from the container without informing any of the pre-school staff or the PI which children's names were pulled. The PI's co-worker approached parents of children whose names were pulled after the parents dropped off their child at the School. The co-worker asked the parents if they had a moment to discuss their possible involvement in a research study. She verbally explained the nature and details of the study. At that time the potential participants were

provided with a letter of introduction, a consent form, and a copy of the tools in order to be able

to evaluate whether they felt comfortable participating. The parents were then given a week to

decide if they wanted to be involved with the study. The PI's co-worker explained to the

potential participants that bringing back the filled in consent form and handing it in to her would

confirm their participation. Those not interested were asked not to hand-in anything.

Once they agreed to participate, the PI met with each parent at the end of the School day

and briefed them about the study and gave them the learning stories templates for the two weeks.

They were also given the PI's contact information for any clarification throughout the process.

They were reassured that there was no pressure to be involved and that they could withdraw from

the study at any time.   All participants were informed that their involvement had no affiliation to

the school or to the program that their child attends. The children's assent to participate in this

study was not attained. The Ethics Board did not require the children's assent, although it was

agreed that should any signs of discomfort be experienced by the children, the observation and

the study of that particular child would cease. It is worth noting that the children were not being

directly interviewed for this study. Rather, the checklist observations routinely completed as part

of the children's participation in the regular program, was simply replaced with another form of

assessment completed under the same circumstances.

Participants

Four families of children diagnosed with ASD participated. The children ranged in ages from 3

to 6 with three male and one female children. The children were given pseudonyms and are

described as follows: Ashley was 4 years old and in the preschool program rather than in the

kindergarten classroom as requested by the parents who wanted to keep her with a specific

educator/researcher in the School. She was diagnosed by a developmental psychologist before

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enrolling at the school. Mark was 3 years old at the time of the study. He is enrolled in the

kindergarten class for half of the week and in the pre-school classroom for the other half of the

week. Mark is a very social, verbal child but has noticeable anxiety around transitional issues

and this is a focus of the program for Mark. Sam was 4 years old at the time of the study and was

originally diagnosed with non-verbal ASD but was beginning to label objects on his own during

the time of this study. Ben was 6 years old at the time of the study. He was non-verbal and

diagnosed with ASD and Global Delay. He wears glasses to assist with his eye sight and uses a

computer system (*Proloquo*) to communicate.

Research Setting

Observational tools were used by parents and the teacher/researcher. The researcher took

observations during class time in the classroom while the parents conducted their observations

on their own time at home or anywhere outside of the School.   Classroom and home

observations were conducted and kept for a period of two weeks

At the end of the two-week period, parent/s were invited to sit down with the researcher

and jointly develop an IPP for each child in the study (each IPP is confidential and each parent or

set of parents sat down alone with the researcher). The discussion during the joint development

of the IPP was audio-taped for later analysis.

At the end of the IPP meeting, the parent/s were asked to engage in a short, semi-

structured interview (see Appendix C for interview questions) with the researcher. The interview

addressed parental thoughts regarding whether the documentation template they used was

beneficial in allowing them to meaningfully contribute to the development of their child's IPPs,

whether it was useful for their own knowledge in helping to understand their child's interests and

needs, and what improvements they would make to the observation template format. The interview was audio-taped for later analysis.

Data Analysis

Once all of the data were collected, the primary investigator transcribed all of the IPP discussions and interviews. Data analysis began with the researcher first reading through transcriptions of the interviews, transcriptions of the discussions during the IPP development, and each child's collection of learning stories. A second reading was done to look for patterns and themes in the data. A third reading was then completed with a view towards understanding if, and how the patterns and themes noted related to Margaret Carr's "Four Ds Framework" (Carr, 2001).

The Four Ds framework includes four processes for use by teachers in assessing children's learning disposition stories. The first involves "Describing" (Carr, 2001, p. 101) and refers to defining the learning that was observed and applying the disposition categories. In this study the focus was on trying to evaluate what the teacher/researcher and the parents described as learning and asked the following questions: What kinds of stories did the teacher/researcher and the parents write about the children? How did those stories relate to the disposition categories in the template?

The second process is that of "Discussing" and refers to the sharing of the stories with other staff, with families, and with the children in order to "develop, confirm, or question an interpretation" (Carr, 2001, p.104). In this study this process was applied by examining the points of discussion that arose between the parents and the teacher/researcher during the development of the IPP. That is, how did the stories parents take compare to those of the

teacher/researcher? What, if any, were the differences or similarities between the teacher/researcher's learning stories of the child and those of the parents?

The third "D" in the process ("Documenting") concerns the format of the learning stories. For example, was the story in the form of printed text, a picture, or a collection of the child's work as well as considerations of the mechanics and feasibility of taking observations (Carr, 2001, p. 104). This study examined the process of documentation by asking parents to reflect on their experiences and by having the teacher/researcher reflect on her experience with the template in the pre-school classroom. Did the parents find the documentation template to be helpful and, if so, how? What recommendations would parents make towards improving the template? What recommendations would the teacher/researcher make towards improving the template?

Lastly, Carr's fourth "D" is that of deciding what to do next (Carr, 2001, p. 101). For Carr, this relates to deciding whether to respond to children's initiatives, or whether to change the direction of the learning or intervene in the learning in any way (Carr, 2001). In this study this process was applied to the development of the IPP and asked: How did the stories contribute to the development of the IPP?

Chapter IV: Findings and Discussion

The following chapter presents the themes and topics resulting from the analysis using Margaret Carr's (2001) four Ds process.

Collaboration and Trust

All of the families interviewed for this study agreed that it is very important to have parents involved when setting goals for children with ASD, and valued the opportunity to

participate in this study for that reason. This study indicated that parents often have feelings of disappointment with the lack of involvement that they have experienced in both setting goals and planning for their children with ASD. They added that a lack of communication between parents and teachers creates problems for the development of trust and leaves parents anxious about having to ask for more time to talk with their child's teacher. They also indicated feeling disconnected from what is happening developmentally and educationally with their children at school especially with commonly existing language barriers in children with ASD which create communication difficulties. For example, Mark's mother's concern was for parents with non-verbal children and the lack of communication and information coming home to the parents. She explained that her son has minimal expressive language and when asked how his day has been always responds with, 'good day' and does not say more. It is impossible for her to know anything about his day without talking to his teacher each time she picks him up. Responses of parents were in line with the findings of Tucker and Schwartz's (2013) study citing the need for parents to connect with their children's teacher.

All parents underscored the importance of sharing information and setting appropriate developmental goals collaboratively with the teacher. They felt it was important to have similar goals and strategies at school and at home in order to create consistency and to maximize each child's full developmental potential. Barton, Lawrence and Deurloo (2011) also outline the importance of including families when setting goals and implementing set goals for children with ASD. It is important to have consistency when working with children that have ASD in order to create the best learning environments that encourage children to develop to their fullest potential (Barton, Lawrence and Deurloo (2011). Sam's mother felt that consistency is one of the most significant aspects to progress and growth which speaks to the importance of goals being the

same in both learning environments. Ben's mother stressed her desire to be part of the educational process for Ben because as she stated "I absolutely wanted more input because I'm with him more than anybody else so without my input they are working on half the story. . . You've got to work with the full picture". In fact she regards all of the individuals who work with her son, including his family members, as part of a team working together for the collective focus of assisting with Ben's development and no person was less or more important than another on this team.

Research indicates that curriculum planning and the setting of individualized developmental goals for children with ASD should be done with the input of both parents and teacher's that work with the child in order to create consistency for the child that is reflective of both the home and the school environment (Leach and Duffy, 2009). Barton & Deurloo (2012) argue that children with ASD have specific strengths and areas that need more attention and stress the need for in-depth IPPs. Ruble and Dalrymple (2002) outline the importance of taking an individualized approach when planning for and working with children that have ASD while incorporating the input and expertise of both the child's teacher and parents.

Experiences Using the Assessment Tool

All of the parents felt as though they were given sufficient time to fill out the observational tools and they enjoyed writing down observations about their child since they do not always have the opportunity or reason to do so. Every family involved in this study confirmed the importance of recording observations in order to assist with program planning and to help inform individualized developmental goals. Mark's mother spoke in depth about her views regarding observational assessments and her own personal comfort level when filling out the observations and stated:

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In general it was quite simple and it was nice for me to actually sit down because I would

never write down an observation of my child . . . we would literally play and then move

on and having this observation now that I look back, I mean this is great because it has

evidence of what he's done and I can actually talk to the teacher.

The parents also felt that the template was much better at capturing their children's development and progress than the checklist assessment currently in use in the school. Pierce, Summer and O'deKirk (2009) discuss the need for a move away from standardized-based assessment methods to incorporate an observation-based template. Observational assessments help determine and monitor progress, children's interests and cognitive development which is an especially important method to use when working with children that have extra support needs (Pierce, Summer and O'deKirk, 2009).

The learning dispositions that led the observations received a positive response and all the parents thought the areas of focus accurately applied to the development of their children. Considering that Carr's learning stories framework was developed and modelled on typically developing children, it is interesting to note that parents felt the dispositions worked for their children as well. This template allowed for and encouraged observations to be taken that spoke directly to the child's interests, developmental strengths and areas of difficulty and/or challenge and supports and speaks to Hatch and Grieshaber's (2002) conclusion about the importance of using observations as a method of collecting evidence-based data that can be used when either planning for the development of an individual child or for the entire program.

Improving the template.

The main suggestion across all participants was a desire to have more in-depth and clearer instructions to help guide the learning stories. Both Mark and Ben's mothers suggested incorporating specific examples of children's actions or behaviours into the tools guide. They felt the observational template should outline what a learning story is and how to write one. The parents reported needing more encouragement to reassure them that there is no right or wrong answer and that they are simply writing a small story about what they observe their child doing. Many of the parents also mentioned a desire for concrete, generic examples of observations to be provided in each section, and this speaks, perhaps for a need to build parental confidence through a workshop on template use beforehand. However, providing examples might influence the originality of the observations and allow for bias.

Parents also expressed a desire to start the learning story at the beginning of each school year and have it continue through until June. Mark's mother stated:

> I wish this had been done half a year ago so I can see what changes he's undergoing and the process that he's gone through. This is the beginning stage and I would hope to see all of the stages that he goes through.

Parents felt that having teachers and parents work together in writing and sharing observations throughout the school year would offer a complete picture of growth and progress, and would further assist with the development of the evolving IPP. This concept is supported by researchers Ruble and Dalrymple (2002) who state that: "successful interventions can be developed when parents and teacher's work as a coordinated and collective team." (p. 76). Using an observational template based in a learning story framework was regarded by all as a way to build an on-going, continuous relationship between the teacher, the child and the child's family. Mark's mother, in particular, indicated that the broad nature of the template allowed her

to give an all-encompassing descriptive observation. She considered this prototype to be "very liberating" and open-ended in comparison to other assessments with which she is familiar. Ben's mother enjoyed the breadth of the questions in the guide which she felt allowed her to go into more detail in the observation when describing her son. In addition, she said that one of the most important aspects of this approach for her was the in-person discussion where information about and the observations of the child were not only shared but discussed in great detail before developing and setting the goals for the IPP. She felt that this method allows for children to be fully represented without having to fit into a pre-designed box or category.

In contrast to the parents' positive experiences with using the template and writing their observations, the teacher/researcher had a somewhat different experience. She found the writing of the stories to be extremely time consuming. Often, while writing one story, there would be another equally interesting story taking place which would be lost because there was not time to write it down. This concept is also explored by Nyland and Alfayez (2012) who report similar findings after testing the use of learning stories with early childhood teacher/researcher s in Australia, New Zealand and in Saudi Arabia. Teacher's reported feelings of being overwhelmed with the amount of time it took to fill out the learning stories. After completing hand written observations of the first child in the study, the teacher/researcher decided to use a voice recorder to document the stories as she saw them develop in the class. At the end of the day, the recorded stories were written down into the template. Using a voice recorder allowed for the teacher/researcher to record a rich array of learning stories while continuing to attend to all of the children in the class.

Congruence of Dispositions to Observations

In all cases, parental stories accurately related to and closely aligned to the dispositional categories and to the attached descriptors to those categories. This would indicate that parents understood the differences between the dispositions and were able to relate their observations to the areas of learning concerned. However, it was interesting to note that two of the four parents (Sam and Mark's mothers) wrote their "stories" in point form and not in the traditional "story" format. Ben's mother alternated between point form and story format. In fact, some of the so-called stories were very minimally described and could not be characterized as stories per se. An example of this minimalist approach is exemplified in Mark's mother's observations when she wrote: "requests to open his green Lego box to retrieve his cars (likes parallel play) he picks out Jack, lightning McQueen and a tractor." (Mark, category 'Belonging', week 1). She commented that it was easier to address the points in the template using point form and wanted to directly address the descriptors accompanying the dispositional categories. However, despite the parent's use of point form instead of the story format used by the teacher/researcher, there were still common points of discussion between the observations. Use of point form did not appear to affect this aspect of the observations in any way. This calls into question the significance of the "learning stories" format for the observations and suggests that it may be the dispositions and their descriptors which are more significant in capturing the information required and that the actual format of writing may not have a significant impact. Nyland and Alfayez, (2012) found similar results in their study and state that researchers "…have continued their research into the value of using learning dispositions as a way of exploring children's learning (Nyland & Alfayez, 2012, p. 402).

The fact that Ben's mother switched half way through may speak to a lack of experience with the writing of stories by parents. But it should be noted that the teacher/researcher also

found it onerous to write learning stories during class time and resorted to the use of a voice recorder to capture the information required. The research on learning stories raises concerns about the time-consuming nature of writing learning stories and this seems to have been experienced by both the teacher/researcher and the parents. Parents also described feeling a pressure to write stories which would depict their children in the most positive light although it was not clear where they felt this pressure came from.

Learning Stories and the IPP

In all the cases there were significant overlap of stories and points of discussion between the teacher/researcher and the parents despite differences in the settings of those stories (the preschool classroom versus the home environment) and differences in the writing format (stories versus point form notes). In addition, the stories appeared to create rich discussions between the parents and the teacher/researcher which influenced the development of the IPP and led to programming changes for the children.

Synchronicity of behaviours at home and at school.

Discussions quite often noted the same behaviours at home and at school. In Ashley's case, the observations between Ashley's parents and the teacher/researcher greatly helped to clarify what initially seemed like isolated, differing behaviours at school and at home. For example, aggressive behaviours were recorded by both the teacher/researcher and the parents; the teacher/researcher wrote stories of Ashley's aggressive behavior with a particular peer and the parents had noted similar aggressive behaviours directed at the family dog. The discussion highlighted Ashley's aggressive tendencies as a general aspect of her behavior and as a focus of

intervention in both the home and the school and creating the kind of consistency between the two settings that children with ASD require.

Interpreting Sam's behaviours in light of home and class stories helped identify the reasons for his behaviour. The most common behaviour that arose in both of the observations and helped to inform a large portion of the IPP discussion for Sam was the common thread of attention seeking behaviour. Both at home and at school Sam is testing the limits that have been set for him and looking for the reaction his actions cause. When this attention seeking behaviour has gone unnoticed or is being intentionally ignored, Sam will either scream loudly or do something intentionally dangerous. In the interview it was discovered that Sam uses different behaviours and tactics at home and at school, however, he is using the same negative attention seeking approach. At school he will climb up onto the tables, chairs or toys shelves to put himself into a dangerous position in order to get a teacher's attention. At home, he pushes on the apartment window screens or tries to tip over the large flat screen television, both being extremely dangerous. This aspect of Sam's behaviour was discussed in great detail during the development of the IPP with a view towards developing strategies for dealing with the behaviour.

Discussion benefits teacher/researcher.

Overall, it seemed that the teacher/researcher learned a great deal more about the children by listening to the parents' interpretations of the stories than she knew beforehand, and that the discussion contributed significantly to programming for that child. For example, a common observation across home and school for Ashley focussed on uncontrolled crying when upset and uncontrolled laughing throughout the day. The crying was self-explanatory; the child was simply upset and had a hard time controlling her emotions. The laughing on the other hand was more of a mystery, especially to the teacher in the class. Both parental and teacher/researcher

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observations noted Ashley's uncontrolled laughing and as a result of the interactive discussion the parents shared that this uncontrolled laughing indicated the child's need to make others around her happy. This was a significant revelation for the teacher/researcher and pointed to a re-direction of strategy for use with Ashley.

In some instances, a parent had a learning story which brought up a point not noted by the teacher/researcher's observations. The parent's observation regarding Ashley's inability to tidy up came out many times in the parent's stories. For example, if Ashley builds something in the house she expects that it will not be touched or taken down. Mention of this by the parent triggered an understanding of Ashley's behavior in the classroom, as for example, when she builds a block tower and has a hard time putting it away or becomes hysterically upset if it is accidently damaged by another child. In fact, the parent commented that Ashley would rather not construct anything than risk having it torn down. Without the parents' stories, this might have been overlooked by the teacher/researcher, but is important for understanding the behavior in the classroom so that strategies such as preparing the child ahead of time, might be created and extreme outbursts avoided.

The discussion with Mark's mother revealed a much clearer understanding of Mark's tendency to try and grab toys from other children. Both the parent and the teacher/researcher had made observations detailing Mark's fascination with certain toys. But during the course of comparing each other's stories, it became apparent that Mark was predominately interested in new toys; as long as it was new for him, whether at home or at school, he would be highly interested. This revelation that he was interested only in new toys helped explain Mark's desire in class to play with toys that other children were using. This was a highly significant observation because it would have been very easy to misinterpret and misunderstand the motive

for his behavior. This realization would not have occurred had it not been for the discussion around the events that had been recorded by both the parent and the teacher/researcher.

One observation that Ben's mother brought to the table was the child's interest in Disney movies and her comment that he is extremely empathetic and actually experiences the emotions of the characters as he watches the characters go through the emotions in the movie. This may explain Ben's occasional, seemingly random outbursts in the classroom in that he might be reacting to the feelings of another child in the room. Targeted observations of Ben in the larger context of the environment would be needed to test this belief, but if true, could have significant implications for his programming.

The strategies that were discussed in the interview were based on many of the observations from the home and the classroom. A commonly observed behaviour was Mark's sensitivity to being reprimanded. Often when spoken to about an undesirable behaviour, he would become inconsolably upset, making it impossible to reason or communicate with him until he had calmed down. This specific reaction was discussed in order to build successful strategies around addressing his aggressive behavioural issues with sharing and seeking negative attention. Mark's mother also noted Mark's emotional sensitivity and she shared a strategy that she has been successfully using at home:

> Mark is very sensitive to different emotions and I've been using this strategy for quite some time. Whenever he does something wrong I say 'Mommy's very sad' and I would actually pout and give him that sad look. He would then actually come over and kiss me and do everything to make me happy and do silly faces.

Mark's mother mentioned this strategy to address an observation that was made by both parties. She thought that this would be a good example of a possible strategy to deal with his undesired behaviours and this strategy was incorporated into the IPP.

Sam uses stimming as a way to regulate himself. When he is having a hard time sitting or following instructions, he often starts rocking back and forth which helps him to eventually focus. Sam also seeks deep pressure such as squeezes on his neck or around his body. These stimms help to calm him for activities or events that usually require him being still such as going to sleep or sitting for circle. Some parents try to eliminate these behaviours, however, Sam's mother realized the importance of this behaviour as way of self-regulation and asked that the teacher's encourage appropriate stimms in the classroom if it helps to regulate his behaviour and she stated:

> When he's anxious or overwhelmed that's what he does so he can regulate himself so that
> he can function. I never want to take that away from him because I would rather see him
> do a little rock than scream down the room.

Based on the parallel observations taken from the home and the school, and with respect to mother's values and opinion, it was decided that squeezes and rocking would be incorporated as a strategy in his IPP.

Discussion benefits parents.

Parents sometimes noted behaviours at home that they could not fully understand. Ashley's parents noted her use of phrases at home such as, "you're bugging me" and they didn't know where it was coming from since it was never used at home. When Ashley was told by her mother that "bugging" is a bad word, Ashley asked if "stop" was also a bad word. During this

discussion the teacher/researcher understood that although Ashley could read and spell, but she did not understand the meaning of the words she was hearing which also caused confusion for her in the classroom as well as when reproducing language at home. This discussion resulted in the formation of direct IPP goals to deal with Ashely's use of undesirable language and to build up more positive vocabulary.

Both at home and at school, Ben had started eliciting attention seeking behaviours such as dumping out containers or pushing objects onto the floor. He was also using specific non-compliance behaviours to avoid participating in undesired activities such as urinating in his pants to avoid and escape from a creative movement activity. When discussing these behaviours that were outlined in both the teacher/researcher's and the mother's observation, it was discovered that the sensory aspects within the environment needed to be more controlled in order to isolate and understand the reason for Ben's non-compliance behaviours. For example, when his mother was told of Ben urinating in order to escape playing animal charades, she assumed it might be because of the fact that the game involved having Ben cover his eyes. But, after a lengthy discussion on this subject it was discovered that, in fact, the environment may have been too loud or too dark for the child to feel comfortable participating in the activity. Once the overwhelming sensory aspects were controlled, Ben felt more comfortable and participated in what seemed to originally be an undesired activity. Without the details from the original observations and the in-depth discussion to develop the IPP, this knowledge and information would have gone undiscovered.

Benefits to classroom programming.

Many of the discussions centered around the socialization of children with ASD into the wider classroom context. Common understandings had the potential to lead to changes in

classroom activities with an impact on the child with ASD as well as other children. The best example of this involved a discussion between Mark's mother and the teacher/researcher. The incident recorded by the teacher/researcher involved an observation about Mark's ability to memorize complete books when they included his passionate interest in sea creatures and when the stories were put to music. The teacher/researcher had noted Mark's request to have a specific book re-read. While waiting for the teacher/researcher to retrieve the story, Mark recited the entire 20 page book beginning to end. This was a complete revelation to the teacher/researcher . The parent then commented that she had been hearing Mark recite some language about sea creatures and did not know that it had originated in the classroom. The discussion illuminated the fact that Mark was passionate about sea creatures and that this could be used in other aspects of his programming. The parent then suggested that she could bring in Mark's sea creatures toys from home for use in the classroom. This discussion led to the creation of an aquarium of sea toys in the drama center with or for all the children in the class. Not only did Mark respond positively to this, but, all of the children enjoyed the exhibit and Mark had an opportunity to socialize with his peers.

This study was an exploration of the applicability of Margaret Carr's learning stories framework for assessing children with ASD and using that information to develop an IPP. The findings have indicated that the format could be used with children who have ASD and that it could contribute to IPP development. Additionally, the parental feedback on the use of the learning stories framework was one of the more significant findings in this study. Discussions which arose from the stories taken by parents and the teacher/researcher in the classroom clarified understandings of the children's behaviour at home and at school. Equally important, the parents greatly enjoyed engaging in the process at home and preferred it to the checklist,

skills based approach currently in use with their children at school. Parents appreciated the two-way dialogue between themselves and the teacher/researcher and their participation in the development of the IPP. They also felt that the dispositional aspects of the framework able to capture relevant aspects of their children's activities.

Concluding Comment and Future Research Direction

A number of concerns have arisen as a result of this study and could be pursued in future research. First, although parents did not comment on whether writing stories at home took up a lot of their time, it is notable that three of the four parents took stories in succinct point form notes. This may indicate a need on behalf of parents to be more efficient and save time. The teacher/researcher found it to be quite overwhelming to write stories in the context of the dynamics of a classroom. This does raise a question regarding the feasibility of asking early childhood educator's to engage in writing quality stories while they are also trying to run a program. In addition to these concerns, the fact that the format of the stories (point form versus recording them and then transcribing into the story format) did not affect the rich discussion between parents and the teacher/researcher which calls into question whether it is the "story" format which is critical or the type of information elicited by the dispositional categories. Lastly, it must be acknowledged that, perhaps, the rich discussions and insights that arose from the interaction between parents and the teacher/researcher would have occurred with other forms of authentic assessment observations. Future research may be able to investigate the questions raised by this study.

Limitations

One of the main limitations to this study included the primary investigator being the individual conducting the research and the lead teacher in the preschool classroom where the research was collected. There was a concern that this would pressure parents into feeling as though they had to agree to participate in the study. Measures were put in place during the recruitment process to limit any pressure or feelings of obligation experienced by parents. Another limitation present included the possibility that parents would feel obligated to report positively about their experience and not be honest about their involvement with the template and the collaborative approach. Additionally, the number of participants involved in the study is a significant drawback. With a larger sample size, more opinions would have been incorporated into the data collected and more suggestions would have been made with regards to changing and improving the template that was created for the study. Lastly, it would have been beneficial to conduct a longitudinal study with the children in order to track their development over the year and to analyse the validity of the template in relation to tracking progress and accurately planning developmental goals for children with ASD. It must be acknowledged that this study did not ask for children's assent which is a crucial aspect of the new sociology of childhood. This must be viewed as a limitation for this study. In addition, it must also be acknowledged that there was a large subjective component to the selection and interpretation of the learning stories recorded. The teacher/researcher recorded a considerable number of stories and then the stories were interpreted to fit into the dispositional categories. There may have been bias in this process.

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Teacher's Template

Learning Stories Observational Template for teacher's

Child:_____   Location: <u>Preschool classroom</u>

Time/schedule: Free Play/Play Time

ECE curriculum	Decision points in the learning story (domains of learning dispositions)	Learning Story Foregrounding (ready, willing and able)	Backgrounding (ready, willing and able)
Belonging	Finding something of interest - Things - Topics - Cues about individual differences and activity preferences		
Well-being	Being involved - Constraints to involvement - Special clothes, toys and rituals - Popular activities - Challenges that keep children going - Special people		
Exploration	Engaging with challenge and persisting when difficulties arise - Characteristics of uncertainty or difficulty - Ways to assist with the challenge - Ways to insert challenge		

Communication	Expressing a point of view - Using the 'hundred languages', a variety of different ways to communicate and express (i.e., song, dance, rhyme, story, actions, body language, etc.) - difficulty within the languages, - thoughtful and creative approaches		
Contribution	Taking responsibility - Child-Adult collaboration on joint task - Peer/sibling collaboration on joint tasks (if applicable) - Children taking responsibility for others well-being - Children take responsibility for the program/home		

Parent Template

Observational Template for parents

Child:_____   Location: <u>Home</u>

Please make a detailed description of what you see during the observation of your child to help

assist with the collaborative development of an individual program plan for your child.

Areas of Observation	Decision points in your observations – What you are looking for to structure your observation	The Observation (Consider if your child is ready, willing and able during each observation)
Playing with objects or toys	Observe something of interest that your child enjoys interacting with. Possibilities include: - Toys - Objects - Topics - Activity preferences	
Involvement with routines – Bathtime, Bedtime, Teeth Brushing, Getting dressed,	Observe your child's involvement in routines involved - Constraints to involvement - Special clothes, toys and rituals - Popular activities - Challenges that keep children going - People or objects that are special	
Exploration	Engaging with objects or activities and persisting when difficulties arise - Characteristics of uncertainty or difficulty	

	- Ways used with your child that assist with the challenge - Ways to insert challenge	
Communication	Communication and expressive behaviour - Ways of communicating (i.e., through song, dance, rhyme, story, actions, body language, spoken word, etc.) - difficulty within any areas of communication - thoughtful and creative approaches	

Appendix C:

Parent Interview Questions

1) What is your opinion of the process you were involved in when developing this individual program plan?

2) What suggestions do you have to improve the process used?

3) What suggestions do you have to improve the process or the assessment tool used?

4) What was your experience with using the assessment tool?

5) Would you make any changes to the assessment tool that you used to write the observations?

6) Do you have any suggestions in general to improve the entire collaborative approach?

RYERSON UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDIES
FACULTY OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

Margaret Carr's Framework for Children with Autism

Letter of Information for Participants

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Please read this letter of information so that you understand what your participation will involve. Before you consent to participate, please ask any questions to be sure you understand what your participation will involve.

Title of study: Using Margaret Carr's framework to document the learning of children with autism.

Investigators: Jessica Similien is a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Early Childhood Studies program at Ryerson University. This study in being done in partial fulfilment of a graduate degree by Jessica Similien and will be conducted under the supervision of Dr. Angela Valeo in the school of Early Childhood Studies at Ryerson University. You are being asked to participate in a research study which will pilot a new assessment format for evaluating children with autism, and investigate the usefulness of this new format for developing an Individual Program Plan (IPP).

If you have questions about any aspect of this study, you can contact any of the following people:

Jessica Similaien

647-828-3299

J3macpha@ryerson.ca

Dr. Angela Valeo,

Associate Professor,

School of Early Childhood Studies,

Ryerson University 416-979-5000 ext.7696

avaleo@ryerson.ca

Janet MacDougall,

Executive Director

"Yes I Can Nursery School",

416-486-4911.

Purpose of the study: This study looks at two issues in the field of education for young children identified with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The first concerns the lack of appropriate classroom documentation and evaluation for this group of children. Current evaluation and documentation methods in early childhood education for children with disabilities are deficit-based and emphasize what children cannot do; because of this, goals, objectives and strategies for the child's learning are often solely remedial and very narrow in nature. The second issue is the need for meaningful collaboration between parents and educators in creating an Individual Program Plan (IPP) for a child with disabilities. While parents are often invited to contribute to the creation of an IPP for young children with disabilities, this is critical for parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder for whom consistency in teaching strategies and care needs to be maintained between the school and the home.

This qualitative study addresses these two issues by developing and implementing an assessment tool based on Margaret Carr's learning stories framework; this is a multi-dimensional, strength-based, authentic assessment tool of potential use to educators in helping develop more appropriate goals for children with autism. It may also have the potential to invite parents to be partners in the documentation of their child's learning and in the creation of an IPP.

Participation: This study will involve the observation of your child in the preschool during school hours. Please be assured that the student-to-staff ratio allows for one of the teachers to be taking observations throughout the day without this affecting the classroom or the children's experiences. The child's teacher (Jessica) will be using an assessment tool based on Margaret Carr's framework which is keeping with the type of authentic assessments done in the early years.

You are being asked to complete a similar, home-based observation log at home. A copy of the observation form is attached to this letter for your information. You are being asked to do this for two weeks. At the end of the two weeks an appointment for you to sit down and meet with Jessica will be scheduled. During this meeting you and Jessica will jointly create an IPP for your child. This session will be audio-taped with your permission and will be transcribed into print format.

In addition to the observations and the development of the IPP, you will be asked to take part in a 15 to 20 minute interview that will be recorded and also transcribed for the research study. The interview

questions will ask you to reflect on your experiences in using the observation log at home and its usefulness in helping you contribute to development of the IPP for your child.

Your participation includes

- Writing observations of your child at home
- Having an audio-recorded meeting with the educator/primary researcher to create an IPP with goals and strategies
- Speaking about your experience during a short interview with this process while being audio recorded.

Your identity will not be known to the researcher (Jessica) until you have signed the consent form. Only at this point will Jessica know of your participation in the study. Your participation in this study is voluntary and confidential. In agreeing to participate, you are asked to voluntarily sign a consent form and you will receive a copy. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time and care for your child will be in no way be affected by your decision to stop participating in the study.

Confidentiality: The interviews will be taped in confidence and the information will only be shared between Jessica Similien and Dr. Valeo. None of the information collected will be shared with any other staff member employed at the centre or any other family attending the school. Neither your name nor the name of the school your child attends will appear on any written documents or publications. Codes will be used during the data collection phase instead of names to ensure your identity is protected. The child's age (at time of observation) and gender only will be noted on the observation form. Immediately after the interviews are written out for the purpose of the paper, the audio recordings will be destroyed.

Once the study is completed all print information collected will be kept for one year in a locked space in Dr. Valeo's office, located in the School of Early Childhood Studies at Ryerson University. Children will not directly participate in this study. Children will be observed by their teacher in the classroom and by their parent/s in their home. If the children notice an observation is being done, the child will be informed that their teacher is writing down what they are doing.

The data collected from this research study will be used to write a major research paper (MRP) and may also be used for publication in an academic journal. At no time will either the parents or the children be identified. If a person or a comment is referenced in the paper, the name will be changed before being used. None of the participants' names nor the name of the school will be mentioned throughout the study. Care will be taken to not provide certain types of details to protect the identity of a particular child or family at the center.

Potential Risks: Potential risks to you and your child are very low. You may encounter discomfort when discussing your child's needs and development. If you do begin to feel

uncomfortable or wish to discontinue your participation for any reason, you may skip a question or withdraw from the study entirely. Observations will cease if the child shows signs of anxiety. Again, please be assured that the student-to-staff ratio allows for one of the teachers to be taking observations throughout the day without this affecting the classroom or the children's experiences.

Potential Benefits: The documentation of your experiences with this process will help determine if this is a beneficial approach in documenting the learning of children with autism and whether it is useful in helping parents and school staff develop an IPP for children with autism. This is a research study and does not incorporate a component of therapy for your child. This indicates that you may or may not receive any direct benefit from your participation.

Voluntary nature of participation: You are not obligated to answer any questions in the interview. You are free to withdraw from participating in the study at any time and your data will be destroyed immediately without being used.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Ryerson Research Ethics Board and has been approved by Janet MacDougal, executive director of the school in which the research is taking place. Any questions regarding participation can be directed to Janet MacDougall or Dr. Angela Valeo (contact details above).

You will be asked to provide a form of contact that is most convenient for you in order to schedule a meeting time for the development of the IPP and the interview. Please indicate on the consent form how you wish for Jessica Similien to contact you (e.g., e-mail, cell phone or other). Thank you.

RYERSON UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDIES
FACULTY OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

Margaret Carr's Framework for Children with Autism

Consent Form

Title of study: Using Margaret Carr's framework to document the learning of children with autism.

CONFIRMATION OF AGREEMENT:

None of the information collected from the observations or the interviews will be shared with any other staff member at your child's school or with any other family attending the school. Neither your name nor the name of the school your child attends will appear on any written documents; both your identity and your child's identity will be protected. Immediately after all audio information is put into print, the audio recordings will be destroyed. Print information collected will be kept for one year in a locked space in Dr. Angela Valeo's office, located in the school of Early Childhood Studies at Ryerson University. After that time, the printed information will be destroyed.

Ensure that you have read and understood the letter of information that has been provided and that you have had ample time to consider your participation in this study. Please make sure all of your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. Your identity will not be known to the researcher (Jessica) until you have signed the consent form. Only at this point will Jessica know of your participation in the study. Your participation in this study is voluntary and is confidential. You are voluntarily signing this consent form and will receive a copy of this consent form.

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to participate in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time.

You have been given a copy of this agreement and you have been told that by signing this consent agreement you are not giving up any of your legal rights. At no time will your withdrawal from participation affect the care being provided to your child. There is absolutely no obligation for you to participate in this research study.

_____

Name of Participant (please print)

_____   _____

Signature of Participant   Date

I agree to be audio recorded for the purposes of this study. I understand that these recordings will be stored and destroyed.

_____   _____

Signature of Participant   Date

I agree to have my child observed during regular classroom routines as part of the study.

_____   Date_____

Signature of Participant or Parent/Guardian

_____

Name of Child (print) if applicable

If at any time I have further questions, I can contact:

Jessica Similien

647-828-3299

j3macpha@ryerson.ca

Janet MacDougall,

Executive Director

"Yes I Can Nursery School",

416-486-4911.

Dr. Angela Valeo, Associate Professor

School of Early Childhood Education, Ryerson University

416-979-5000 ext.7696

avaleo@ryerson.ca

This study has been reviewed by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board. If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant in this study please contact:

Research Ethics Board

c/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation

Ryerson University

350 Victoria Street

Toronto, ON M5B 2K3

416-979-5042

rebchair@ryerson.ca

The following is my contact information for use in scheduling a time to sit down and develop the IPP:

_____