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**What Makes a Great Story? Teacher and Parent Perceptions of Quality Learning
Stories in Early Childhood Education**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Education
at Massey University, Palmerston North,
New Zealand.

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2019

Abstract

Learning stories have held a primary position within the assessment landscape of early childhood education in New Zealand for over two decades. Learning stories are designed as formative approach to assessment that occurs in partnership with parents and families. Emerging evidence suggests that the way in which learning stories are used for assessment and to support children's learning varies widely. Limited research has attended to teacher beliefs about their use of learning stories and the values that guide their practice. In addition, limited research has examined parents' perspectives of learning stories and the features parents place value upon. This study aims to address these identified gaps in literature through exploring what features and practices of learning stories teachers and parents value and considers the ways in which these perspectives may align.

An interview-based, qualitative case study approach was adopted to explore the perspectives of 9 teachers and 10 parents across two early childhood education settings in New Zealand. Data collection methods for this study drew on replication of the teacher interview tool and the supporting protocol from *The Learning Stories Project* (McLaughlin, Cameron, Dean, & Aspden, 2016) with a study-specific paired interview and supporting protocol developed for use with parents.

Findings revealed that teachers and parents placed value on eight shared features and practices. Most notably, well presented, personally meaningful stories individualised to children and inclusive of their voices were collectively valued by both teachers and parents, as were opportunities for informal sharing and connection to parental aspirations. Yet, several other key features and practices of learning stories yielded disparate views from parent and teacher participants, including the value placed on links to curriculum and learning, inclusion of parent voice, and the use of stories that were connected to a wider evidential cycle of learning. Five key points were identified from data analysis as key discoveries: differing and shared views on good learning stories; the things not said; a preference for individual stories over group stories; meeting the needs and expectations of third party audiences; and an absence of shared dialogue between teachers and parents on valued practices. Findings highlight the need for deeper collaboration and shared understanding between teachers and parents in relation to the valued features of learning stories, alongside further consideration afforded to the prevalence of wider assessment methods in early childhood education to meet diverse needs.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my Massey University Institute of Education supervisors, Tara McLaughlin and Karyn Aspden, for their inspiration, unfailingly encouragement, and extraordinary wisdom. Their guidance throughout this study has provoked me to think outside of the box and approach this study with strong methodical assurance and confidence. I am particularly thankful for their compassion and support throughout the wider journey of this thesis.

I learnt the power of storytelling early in my life from both of my parents. There were no iPads, iPods, or Netflix movies during my childhood, only stories told and re-told to my captivating ears around the kitchen table. Tales of my mother's life in the Papua New Guinea jungle and my father's adventures helping to run the family corner store in Dunedin. Tales of snakes and scorpions, of chocolate fish with tails nibbled off, and bikes without brakes flying down Baldwin Street. English author Terry Pratchett once said, "*People think that stories are shaped by people. In fact, it's the other way around*". This quote aptly captures the way in which I was influenced by the early stories told to me and the way in which the spirit of such storytelling has continued to lace and imbue my own life with inspiration, inquiry, and intrigue. My interest in learning stories stems very much from this early attraction to storied narration.

Grateful thanks extend to my family and friends who have encouraged and supported me throughout this journey. Special thanks to my husband, Hara, who has had to take up the evening reins at home so I could focus on this study, and to my beautiful daughter, Katarina, who has never really known her Mum 'free' from study. I am looking forward to long beach walks with you both where I no longer carry a notebook to stop and jot down my developing thesis thoughts. Particular thanks to my past and present wonderful work colleagues and students who have gone above and beyond to help in so many practical and inspiring ways. A special mention to my fellow 'Kiwi Mum' Nic Rout for patiently listening to the unfolding tales of my thesis and encouraging me to 'keep on keeping on' in my quest.

I am particularly indebted to the two settings that allowed this study to take place and to the participants from within these settings who gave so freely of their time, sharing their thoughts and values so openly. I am also thankful for the opportunity afforded to me to build on Massey University's Institute of Education '*The Learning Stories Project*' (McLaughlin et al., 2016). Finally, I would like to acknowledge the financial support of the

Massey University Institute of Education Pathway Scholarship which I was awarded in 2018, alongside the Graduate Research Fund.

For my mother, Annette Watts. When words fail, the memories of stories remain.

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Overview

Quality assessment practice in early childhood education is considered an essential part of effective pedagogy (Drummond, 2012). Assessment, and understandings of assessment within early childhood education, have evolved over time in line with shifting values and paradigms (Turnock, 2009). Within the New Zealand context, learning stories are a common approach to assessment in early childhood education. Considered a “relative newcomer” (Niles, 2016, p. 112) to the field of assessment, the processes and practices that influence learning stories can be considered from their theoretical underpinnings and also directly from implemented practice within the sector. Alignment and understanding of these two components (i.e. theoretical underpinnings and the implementation of learning stories within the sector) will contribute to further knowledge about effective and meaningful assessment practice. The present research explores what features and practices are considered to contribute towards a good learning story from the perspective of teachers and parents (i.e. implementation within the sector).

The introduction chapter to this study provides an overview to the research including the context for assessment, key terms for assessment, and the context for New Zealand assessment with an emphasis on historical and theoretical underpinnings. This followed by a description of the researcher’s personal interest in the topic and the rationale and aims for the present study.

1.2. Evolving views of assessment

Assessment is a core element in teaching practice that guides daily practices (Drummond, 2012). Within early childhood education, assessment practices require acknowledgment of the way in which young children learn and grow and thoughtful reflection (Dunphy, 2010). Whilst assessment in early childhood serves a range of purposes, optimal practice links assessment with benefit for children in supporting growth and development through informed and intentional teaching (Dubiel, 2016). Assessment is therefore influential in driving an unfolding curriculum for young children (Carr, Hatherly, Lee, & Ramsey, 2003; Ministry of Education, 1996). Contemporary assessment practices in New Zealand early childhood education have undergone a significant shift from historically dominant cognitive-developmental paradigms to sociocultural frameworks of understanding (Niles, 2016). This has led to a re-conceptualisation of core principles of assessment and the way in which quality features are defined in New Zealand. This shift has led to new ways of

observing, documenting, and sharing the learning of young children (Carr, 2001; Hill, 2011).

Constructs of 'assessment', in a broad sense, stem from early origins of the Latin word 'assessare' which carries an understanding of 'fixing an amount of a fine or tax', or 'judging the value' of an object or property (Lamprianou & Athanasou, 2009). 'Assessing' in this sense, and later notions of 'testing', often imply a hierarchical, monocultural, approach towards determining and communicating a 'judgement' (William, Klenowski, & Rueda, 2010). In terms of education, concepts of testing are seen to have been largely established through the field of psychology and early-twentieth century advances in IQ testing and screening (Pellegrino, 2004). Today, the evolutionary development of educational assessment has moved towards significantly more contrasting qualities than those embraced in earlier decades. 'Assessment' as opposed to 'testing', which is now viewed as one means of assessment, is now more typically understood as the act of interpreting information gathered about children's learning (Brown, 2002). Contributing understanding to this is Drummond's (2012) definition that early childhood assessment is "the ways in which, in our everyday practice, we observe children's learning, strive to understand it, and then put our understanding to good use" (p. 12). Core within this description, and signalling key historical shifts, is the inherent role of subjective interpretation (Carr, 1999).

Broad understandings of quality assessment practice in early childhood today recognise the importance of a multi-voiced, inclusive and participatory approach (Ministry of Education, 2004), encompassing of naturalistic observation (Rose & Rogers, 2012), and taking place in an on-going and formative manner (Carr, 2001). Considerations to both assessment approach and content uphold the holistic way young children learn, acknowledging reciprocal relationships between people, places, and things (Ministry of Education, 1998). Building on these features, quality assessment is individualised in focus (Zhang, 2015), and promotes a strengths based approach which Carr and Lee (2012) contend fosters children's developing identities of themselves as capable learners with agency. Additional core features in early childhood education that have been identified as quality assessment constructs include clear recognition of assessment purpose and the use of methods tailored to identified purpose, fair and equitable processes, and the gathering and dissemination of information for collaborative interpretation that works to bring benefit to children (Drummond, 2012; Fraser & McLaughlin, 2016; Rose & Rogers, 2012). Pedagogical documentation (defined below) is a further feature of quality

assessment practice that has emerged as a central contemporary element (Dubiel, 2016; Kalliala & Pramling Samuelsson, 2014; Rinaldi, 2001, 2014; Seitz, 2008; Zhang, 2017).

1.3. Defining key terms

Zhang (2017) notes the diversity that exists with definitions of assessment in early childhood education. Within this study several key terms are pivotal and require a shared understanding. These key terms for the purposes of this study are highlighted and defined as follows:

- **Assessment** is understood as the process of gathering information about children in order to find out what they know, what they can do, and what they are learning (Hart, 1994). In early childhood education, assessment practices are aligned with observations of children's learning in everyday practice as opposed to formalised testing (Drummond, 2003).
- A **credit-based approach** seeks to describe successful learning moments and experiences for children, emphasising learning strengths (Niles, 2015).
- A **child-centred assessment approach** is understood to place the child at the centre of assessment processes through capturing their voice and promoting a holistic image of the child as a learner (Dubiel, 2016).
- **Constructivist theory** considers that people actively construct their own meaning and knowledge of the world from an interaction between their experiences and their ideas (Mogashoa, 2014).
- **Formative assessment** is defined as a process that teachers employ to collect and use assessment information to tailor instruction to the individual needs of children (Riley-Ayers, 2014).
- **Learning stories** are considered as "stories about learning, documented by teachers, often dictated by children and, in school, written by the learners themselves. They include text that describes the context and nature of the learning episode, an analysis of the learning, usually one or more photographs (occasionally a DVD), and a suggestion about future work" (Carr, 2001, p. 260).
- **Good learning stories** are those that are selected by teachers or parents in this study for the features and practices that are personally valued. A good learning story, selected from this perspective, is underpinned and informed by personal and professional values and may differ from wider notions of what a quality learning story may look like.
- **Pedagogical documentation** is understood as a visible process of reflecting, thinking and learning to support and enhance understanding of what it is that children

might be thinking. Pedagogical documentation can take many forms such as photographs, artefacts, and anecdotal notes of what children say and do (Rinaldi, 2001).

- **Sociocultural paradigm** seeks to position social and cultural relationships as pivotal towards the influence they hold on thinking, learning, knowing and interacting with others (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

1.4. Context for research – A New Zealand approach to assessment

The driving vision of *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa Early childhood curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017) is deeply rooted in post-modern, post-structural constructs, positing young children as inherently competent and confident contributors who can drive the direction of their own learning journeys (May & Carr, 2000; Sellers, 2013). This aspiring vision sets the context for a learner-centred curriculum in which the recognised interests and strengths of a child, and their surrounding community, determine curriculum focus (McLachlan, Fleer, & Edwards, 2013). Positioned against this backdrop, early childhood education assessment practice in New Zealand aims to embody purposeful and shared observation as a key method to support the recognition of, and response to, an unfolding learner-directed curriculum (Davis, 2006; Loggenberg, 2011). The revised edition of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) gives specific direction to assessment noting this as “formative, intended to support curriculum planning and enhance learning” (p. 63) and acknowledges both formal and informal ongoing approaches. Explicit focus within the revised curriculum is directed towards narrative forms of assessment with learning stories being highlighted as one such approach (Ministry of Education, 2017). Furthermore, assessment guidelines highlight the “mana enhancing”, strengths-based perspective that is intended to underpin early childhood assessment in New Zealand, taking into account the whole child and the situated social and cultural context surrounding the child (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Te Whāriki acknowledges the holistic way in which young children learn through promoting a curriculum of play, and positioning children as “competent and confident learners” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9) who learn through “reciprocal and responsive relationships with people, places and things” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9). This empowering stance from the first edition of the curriculum heralded in a change not only in the vision of early childhood education, but also in valued pedagogies and assessment practice, leading this curriculum to be recognised as innovative (Lee, 2013), a taonga (Te One, 2013), transformative (Ritchie, 2013), inclusive (Dunn, 2000), radical (Carr, 1998b), and a “progressive and cogent document” (Taguma, Litjens, & Makowiecki, 2012, p. 25).

Meade (2000) noted that there were over 20 different types of early childhood settings at the time *Te Whāriki* was first being drafted. The resulting curriculum draft responded to this diversity in practice by providing a bicultural framework for early childhood education settings to engage with, rather than a universal, prescriptive document. This framework, based on four underpinning principles (relationships, empowerment, family and community, and holistic development) and five strands (well-being, belonging, contribution, communication, and exploration), delegates responsibility to individual settings to flesh out their local curriculum, building on shared values within their communities and differing learning directions provided by children (Ministry of Education, 1996). Curriculum outcomes are seen to emerge from strand-based goals, listed at 118 in the first 1996 edition and scaled back to 20 in the newly revised 2017 publication. These outcomes extend to encompass dispositional growth, working theories, and a deepening of holistic identity for children as capable and confident learners (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017). The design of *Te Whāriki* has been metaphorically associated with that of a spider web, as opposed to a traditional stepping stone developmental structure, acknowledging the sociocultural complexity of individual learning that holds purpose (May & Carr, 1998). Adding further to this construct is the metaphoric meaning of *Te Whāriki* as a 'woven mat' denoting the creation of a setting-specific localised curriculum in which the principles and strands are woven together to create a responsive learning programme in different ways for different children in different settings (Nuttall, 2013).

Te Whāriki's intrinsic vision of children as active explorers, confident, competent, and curious inquirers within their environment brought about significant changes in teaching and learning roles and practices (Ministry of Education, 1996; Ramsey, Lee, & Carr, 2013). For example, the role of the educator and the role of the child, previously hierarchically situated in terms of an adult 'knowledge-holder' and a passive child as a 'knowledge-receiver', was radically re-positioned towards participatory and relational pedagogies, breaking ties with earlier practices in the sector (Ramsey, Lee, & Carr, 2013). Such pedagogies, running central to *Te Whāriki*, place emphasis on active participation by learners, multi-voiced collaboration, and co-construction of teaching and learning alongside children.

Embedding the aspirations of *Te Whāriki* into practice has required a re-conceptualisation of teaching and assessment practices. During the initial drafting of *Te Whāriki*, pedagogical consideration moved towards conceptualising an assessment and self-evaluation framework as a responsive design to the emerging curriculum framework (Te One, 2003). Margaret Carr, a co-writer of *Te Whāriki* and the educational leader behind

the subsequent learning story approach, was particularly committed towards developing such an integrated framework (Carr, 2001). Subsequently, during the 1990's, Carr spear-headed a series of research initiatives exploring an assessment approach that would work in synergy with the new emergent curriculum framework (Nuttall, 2013). Most notable during this period was Carr's oversight of the Ministry of Education's three-phased *Project for Assessing Children's Experiences in Early Childhood Settings* (PACE) which focused on developing an assessment framework (Carr, 1998a; Carr, 1998b; Carr, 1998c). This project centralised focus around effective assessment as "a process in which our understanding of children's learning, acquired through observation and reflection, can be used to evaluate and enrich the curriculum" (Drummond, 1995, p. 13). This aligned with the definition in the initial edition of *Te Whāriki* which asserted that "the purpose of assessment is to give useful information about children's learning ... for the purpose of improving the programme" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 29). *Te Whāriki* provided further key direction towards the development of an assessment framework maintaining that assessment should primarily be viewed in light of developing learning dispositions and working theories, whilst mindful that approaches are "based on the goals of each strand and that the principles of the curriculum are always applied" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 29).

The learning stories framework was the resultant product from Carr's involvement in PACE. Building on concepts of narrative assessment, this framework positions the principles of *Te Whāriki* to underpin its structure and promotes the adoption of multi-voiced narration (teachers, parents, children) to capture developing learning dispositions or working theories (Podmore, 2006). Carr provided direction for teacher observations by further defining learning dispositions that aligned to the five curriculum strands (Podmore, May, & Mara, 1997). These learning dispositions are stated as *courage and curiosity, trust and playfulness, persevering, confidence, and taking responsibility* (Podmore, May, & Carr, 2001). Educators are supported in their observation of these dispositions through considering five associated behaviours that may be present during a recorded learning experience (Carr, 2001). These key behaviours are; *taking an interest, being involved, persisting with difficulty, expressing a point of view or feeling and taking responsibility* (Anthony, McLachlan, & Poh, 2015). Carr (2001) placed emphasis on the five aligned dispositions in order to capture the "transformation of participation" (p. 76) which underpins purposeful learning. The learning stories framework therefore aims to capture the holistic way in which children learn, and provides teachers with a tool to support their enactment of the curriculum.

To further support teachers with their understanding of learning stories, the government funded the development of *Kei Tua o te Pae / Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2007a, 2007b, 2009a, 2009b). The exemplars were designed to support teachers with their developing narrative assessment practice aligned to the curriculum. Particular emphasis is placed on diverse ways of noticing, recognising, and responding, and involving children and families within the assessment process.

Learning stories are typically described as one-page credit-based narratives, typically written in the first person by a teacher and inclusive of parent and child voices (Anthony, McLachlan, & Poh, 2015; Carr, 2001). Alongside employing a storied approach to the identification and sharing of learning, the inclusion of photographs or digital media in learning stories is considered mainstream practice in promoting the visibility of children's learning and meaning-making (Boardman, 2007; Daniels, 2013; Southcott, 2015). Individual learning stories are commonly collated in portfolios, often electronically, which are shared with parents and are accessible to children (Fraser & McLaughlin, 2016; Niles, 2015). The story telling nature of this approach promotes an engaging medium for children and their families (Hatherly & Sands, 2002). Learning stories aim to celebrate meaningful learning, connected to the past and informing the future (Carr & Lee, 2012). The development and introduction to the sector of learning stories provided teachers with a new narrative assessment approach that capitalised on the emerging popularity of authentic assessment philosophies, recognised for their emphasis towards tracking and highlighting individual learning successes. This approach specifically directs attention to the individuality of young children and their unfolding learning pathway (Bagnato, 2007; Cohen, Stern, Balaban, & Gropper, 2008).

Learning stories are recognised to be used in diverse ways across the early childhood education sector (Loggenberg, 2011; Niles, 2016). Concern however has been expressed that within such diversity also exists a broad range of quality (Education Review Office, 2007, 2016). Quality practices remain central to the realisation of both short and long term gains from early childhood participation (Ministry of Education, 2015). The integral part that quality assessment contributes to teaching and learning practices is well recognised (Mitchell, 2008). As such, further understanding of the features of quality assessment practices, including quality learning stories, is worthy of investment. This study responds in part to this opportunity through seeking to inquire further into what features and practices associated with learning stories are particularly valued from the perspective of teachers and parents.

1.5. A personal interest

Through an array of teaching, tutoring, and leadership roles I have been afforded the opportunity to work alongside both pre-service teachers and those established in their practice. Within my pre-service early childhood education role, both as a tutor and an adjunct academic marker, I have found myself in the role of either introducing pre-service teachers to learning stories, or marking practicum assignments showcasing learning stories as part of a wider assessment and planning cycle. In my current special school leadership role, I seized an opening to introduce teaching staff to the learning story approach and worked to embed this within our school's teaching and learning practice. An enduring thread that has underpinned my work across settings is, what makes a good learning story and according to whom? Marking schedules and matrices provide direction towards 'grading' a pre-service teacher's learning story, and teachers in my current school have worked earnestly towards developing their own list of guidelines to support peer moderation for ensuring 'good' learning stories. However, I often wonder what parents value in learning stories and question whether teachers may value different features and practices. I also wonder how these perspectives may align with the theoretical framework of learning stories that is so richly described by Carr (2001). This study has therefore grown from my 'wonderings' and these have been pivotal towards shaping my inquiry in this domain.

The present study aims to contribute towards *The Learning Stories Project*, a wider research initiative based at Massey University's Institute of Education, collaboratively being undertaken by researchers Tara McLaughlin, Monica Cameron, and Karyn Aspden and their colleague Jo Dean. This wider project seeks to explore quality features of learning stories in order to support the creation of a teacher toolkit that can guide the quality of written learning stories. The present study seeks to contribute to this broader project through contribution of both teacher and parent perspectives on what constitutes a good learning story. The present study builds on the use of the teacher interview tool and the supporting protocol from *The Learning Stories Project* (McLaughlin et al., 2016), allowing for later cross-study consideration, while the inclusion of parent participants within the current study offers a valuable extension to the data collected for *The Learning Stories Project* to date.

1.6. Rationale for the study

The current research base examining learning stories as an assessment tool is limited, despite the fact learning stories are recognised as the predominant assessment approach in early childhood education in New Zealand (Loggenberg, 2011). The theoretical

frameworks and underpinning theories associated with learning stories have been brought to question in some studies (Anthony, McLachlan, & Poh, 2015; Blaiklock, 2008, 2010; Mawson, 2011; Niles, 2016; Zhang, 2017), suggesting potential disconnection between theory and practice. This has been particularly noted in terms of the active use of learning stories as a formative assessment tool and the recognition of learning within documented experiences (Anthony, McLachlan, & Poh, 2015; Davis, 2006; Niles, 2016; Zhang, 2017). Such findings suggest that further research and professional development may be needed to fully implement learning stories as a robust assessment approach aligned to its guiding theoretical framework.

Exploring and comparing what teachers and parents as key partners in this assessment approach value as quality features and practices in learning stories contributes new information and adds strength to current initiatives. This study therefore explores teacher and parent perspectives on what features and practices are considered important in the writing of a good learning story. The purpose of this study is to identify these and determine elements both in common with each other and elements valued uniquely by each group. As such, this study sets out to contribute to further understanding of quality learning story practice.

1.7. Aims and organisation of the study

There are two main aims for the study.

1. To identify what features and practices associated with learning stories are valued by teachers and parents.
2. To consider potential similarities and / or differences that may present within teacher – parent perspectives on what makes a good learning story.

From these aims, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are teachers' perspectives of the key quality features and practices in learning stories?
2. What are parents' perspectives of the key quality features and practices in learning stories?
3. What is the alignment between teacher and parent perspectives?

1.8. Outline of chapters

The structure of this study is organised into 5 chapters, including this introductory chapter which presents the study's rationale, a definition of key terms pertinent to this study, the research aims and definitive research questions. Chapter 2 provides a review of the

literature drawing on national and international understandings of quality assessment features and the enactment of the learning story approach in terms of both strengths and observed challenges in practice. Chapter 3 outlines the qualitative methodology employed for this study and the constructivist approach that underpins this. This is followed by an in-depth description of the process of data collection and analysis and a discussion of the core ethical principles considered in this study. Features of this study's trustworthiness are woven through this chapter. Chapter 4 presents the findings of this study in detail. Emergent themes are illustrated by participant responses. A priori codes used deductively during data reduction are considered in terms of unspoken responses and absent themes. Chapter 5 highlights the significance and implication of the findings, in light of the extant literature and the conceptual notions that underpin narrative assessments. This chapter notes the limitations of the research and provides recommendations for future research. This chapter concludes the study by presenting a succinct summary statement of the overall research and the contribution this offers.

Chapter Two

Review of Related Literature

2.1. Introduction

Learning stories are the predominant method of assessment in early childhood education in New Zealand (Cameron, 2018; Education Review Office, 2016; Loggenberg, 2011). The learning stories approach is designed to promote the visibility of children's learning and provide formative direction for ongoing learning (Carr, 2001). Commonly recognised as a strengths-based approach, learning stories are intended to invite the active contribution of children and their families. The learning stories approach has also influenced teachers' views and enactment of other assessments, pedagogical documentation, planning, and evaluation (Loggenberg, 2011; Mitchell, 2008). Despite the central nature of learning stories within early childhood education in New Zealand, a limited body of research exists inquiring into critical components of this assessment approach. This is particularly noted in terms of understanding the perspectives of teachers and parents, two of the core stakeholders who have been instrumental users of learning stories for the past two decades. As the revised edition of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) offers new impetus towards exploring curriculum and underpinning planning and assessment approaches, it is timely to consider this gap in literature. In this literature review the following topics will be covered:

- The search process used to identify literature for this review.
- Quality assessment features focusing on international and national trends.
- The context related to the enactment of the curriculum and learning stories.
- Strengths and advantages of the learning stories approach.
- Challenges and critiques of the learning stories approach, including recognised barriers to implementation.
- Teacher and parent perceptions on the role and purpose of the learning stories approach.

This review concludes with a summative statement on the literature reviewed, and articulates a rationale for the current study in recognising the gaps in the existing research literature.

2.2. Search Terms

The databases that were accessed to search for literature on learning stories included ERIC online database, A+ Education, EBSCO Education Source, Index New Zealand and Massey University's Discover search. The predominant search terms used were *Te*

Whāriki, assessment, formative assessment, narrative assessment, assessment for learning, and both learning story and learning stories. These terms were linked with the following descriptor terms; early childhood education, early years, early education, pedagogy, and curriculum. The initial search was limited to studies published within the last ten years, this was later broadened to gather historical perspectives associated with the development and introduction of learning stories. The initial search also focused on New Zealand based research with a secondary search opening this up to be inclusive of broader international studies. The Massey University library catalogue was also searched for relevant theses and books and the Ministry of Education website was searched for relevant evaluative reports. Key focus was given towards peer-reviewed published research however, several sources identified were commentaries, practice-descriptions, or resources. This study's literature review therefore draws on empirical research studies, books, reports, commentary and theoretical articles, and New Zealand university theses.

2.3. Quality features of assessment

Several key characteristics underpin quality assessment practices for young children in New Zealand and internationally. To further unpack these features, the following sections outline features that are shared both internationally and in New Zealand followed by features that receive more emphasis either internationally or in New Zealand.

2.3.1. Shared features of assessment: International and national

Internationally and in New Zealand there is broad acceptance that assessment of young children should hold clear value for children (Drummond, 2003; Guddemi & Case, 2004; Loggenberg, 2011; Rose & Rogers, 2012). Assessment serves to support learning and development opportunities for young children, either directly or indirectly through informing programmes, practice, and pedagogy (Drummond, 2012). Quality assessment practices are also informed by understandings of the way in which young children grow and learn and the pedagogical approaches that underpin early childhood education. Such practices are cognisant of the non-linear, episodic, and often divergent manner in which young children develop, and the importance of the social and cultural context in which children relate and make meaning (Guddemi & Case, 2004; Niles, 2016). Quality assessment practices therefore acknowledge, reflect, and document contextual features as integral elements of the learning. This aspect of assessment practice in early childhood education has been informed by sociocultural theory, which affirms unique, relationally-rich, and responsive learning contexts (Agbenyega, 2009; Fleer, 2010). From within the sociocultural paradigm, quality assessment practice supports a focus on the child in action

with others, or as McLachlan, Edwards, Margrain, and McLean (2013) note, the “child-in-context” (p. 5).

In order to effectively capture the early learning of the child-in-context, quality assessments use naturalistic observations and strive to be on-going in nature (Dubiel, 2016; Fraser & McLaughlin, 2016). The on-going nature of assessment places emphasis on continuity over time, and broadly aims to capture authentic, process based, learning (Fleer, 2002), typically in the context of play and routines. Effective assessment practice therefore values experiential and play-based learning (Niles, 2016; Rinaldi, 2001). Building on the emphasis placed on real-life learning is the understanding that quality assessment practice occurs in familiar and naturalistic contexts for young children (Broadfoot, 2007; Buldu, 2010). In this sense, capturing meaningful, accurate, and authentic information about children’s learning is paramount to quality practice (Drummond, 2012; Dubiel, 2016).

A child-centred approach to assessment underpins quality practice in acknowledging and responding to individual interests, aspirations, and cultural beliefs (Dubiel, 2016). Constructs of child-centred practice include viewing children as intrinsically curious and capable learners and endorse the right of children to choose, communicate, and make connections in their own way (Rose & Rogers, 2012). Implicit in a child-centered approach is the belief that effective assessment acknowledges strengths and needs, as opposed to a singular focus on weaknesses or deficits. Well-developed assessment practices in early childhood education are therefore not only guided by curriculum foci, but are also appropriate to children’s age and responsive to children’s interests and strengths, recognising and celebrating significant learning moments (Carr, 2011; McLachlan, 2018; Niles, 2016), while also providing a pathway to identify and support children’s learning needs (McLachlan, 2018). Furthermore, quality practice integrates equitable processes to ensure that assessments are fair and culturally sensitive (Bagnato, 2007; Dubiel, 2016; Fraser & McLaughlin, 2016; Rameka, 2011; Rose & Rogers, 2012), while also capturing multiple perspectives, providing differing lenses for the interpretation of learning (Fraser & McLaughlin, 2016). Such practice works to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of assessment (Carr, 2001; Fraser & McLaughlin, 2016; Niles, 2016; Riley-Ayers, 2014). As Dubiel (2016) asserts, “any authentic view of a child will.... require multiple perspectives in order to be accurate, and to truly reflect all that is known about the child in a range of different contexts and scenarios” (p. 76). Quality assessment practice therefore places emphasis on knowing and understanding children through

multiple lenses and enabling important features of learning to be brought to the foreground (Rose & Rogers, 2012).

Documentation, and the sharing of assessment information, is a further key feature of effective practice that has developed in importance (Carr & Lee, 2012; Dunphy, 2010; Fraser & McLaughlin, 2016). Considered a by-product of assessment itself (Dubiel, 2016), documentation serves to promote the visibility of significant learning, contributing to authenticity and credibility, as well as offering a medium to capture the contributions of others (Carr & Lee, 2012; Seitz, 2008). Effective documentation is recognised as that which holds meaning to children and their families, showcasing interests and strengths (Carr & Lee, 2012). Photographs, digital media, and artefacts, are commonly accepted additions to documentation that work to serve these aims (Boardman, 2007; Carr, 2001). Documented assessments are recognised to hold broader effect when they are shared, accessible, and re-visited (Carr, 2011; MacNaughton & Williams, 2004). The acknowledgement of the pivotal role of documentation within early years assessment has led Dunphy (2010) to consider quality assessment practice as inclusive of “observing and empathising; communicating; interviewing; documenting and reflecting on learning; compiling portfolios; and developing narratives about learning” (p. 48). Dunphy’s (2010) summation highlights the diverse skills, knowledge, and practices that are required for successful assessment practice, as well as the role of documentation within contemporary assessment practice.

2.3.2. Features of assessment: Differences between international and national literature

While there are many shared quality features of assessment between the international and New Zealand literature, there are also a few notable differences in areas that are more or less emphasised. For example, internationally, assessment in early childhood is understood to be undertaken for a range of purposes, involving multiple methods in order to meet differing purposes (Gullo, 2005, 2013; Fraser & McLaughlin, 2016). Quality practice emphasises the need for a clear understanding of the purpose of assessment when working with children, as this will inform how teachers select, implement, interpret, document, and share assessments (Fraser & McLaughlin, 2016; Loggenberg, 2011; Notari-Syverson & Losardo, 2004; Snow & Van Hemel, 2008). In New Zealand, the early 1996 edition of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education) gave clear direction on the purpose of assessment, contending that this was to “give useful information about children’s learning and development to the adults providing the programme and to children and their families” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 29), placing emphasis on formative assessment and

observation as the prime method (Niles, 1996). The recently revised edition of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) continues this focus however presents a broader view of purpose noting that assessment is used to “find out about what children know and can do, what interests them, how they are progressing, what new learning opportunities are suggested, and where additional support may be required” (p. 63). It also asserts that “assessment makes valued learning visible” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 48) and, as McLachlan (2018) highlights, the document extends to express ‘valued learning’ as the revised 20 learning outcomes and parent / whānau aspirations. Given the recency of the revised curriculum, how this statement of purpose impacts on assessment methods and practice is still being understood. It has been suggested, for example, that for many services “assessing children’s progress in the 20 broad learning outcomes may mean a shift in the way they use the curriculum..... with the 20 learning outcomes guiding what learning matters for a child or group of children, and therefore what will be assessed” (Ministry of Education, n.d.).

Internationally there is a strong emphasis on multiple methods utilising both formal and informal observations (Dubiel, 2016; Fraser & McLaughlin, 2016). Zhang (2015), for example, notes that in international contexts, such as the United States of America, conventional, standardised assessments prevail despite calls within the sector to adopt more authentic approaches towards assessment. By comparison, in New Zealand informal observation has to date been the prime method of assessment used (Cameron, 2018; McLachlan, 2018), with practices involving “intelligent observation by experienced and knowledgeable adults for the purpose of improving the programme” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 29). The emphasis in New Zealand on informal over formal observations to date may have been driven by teachers’ interpretations of the 1996 curriculum alongside a sociocultural paradigm which is widely touted as underpinning teacher practice in this country (Niles, 2015). Observation was the only method of assessment named in the first edition of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education 1996), albeit without type or frequency being given further definition (McLachlan, 2018). In the revised curriculum, direction for assessment is noted as “both formal and informal” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 63), and draws on a range of methods to “track changes in children’s capabilities, consider possible pathways for learning, and plan to support these” (p. 63). Assessment emphasis in New Zealand is therefore at a crossroads of change as the sector more fully considers practices that will work with effect to realise the intent of the revised curriculum.

At the heart of quality assessment in the New Zealand context is the supposition that young children are capable and confident learners, who bring meaningful prior learning experiences to their education and care settings, and who are active in demonstrating and directing their own learning (Ministry of Education, 1996; Nuttall, 2013). Although this view is generally shared internationally, in New Zealand the understanding of children as “active and contributing agents” (McLachlan, 2018, p. 50) within the process of assessment is strongly emphasised. This view extends to include the capturing of a child’s own voice in assessments alongside the collaboration with others, such as parents. In New Zealand, the gathering of multiple perspectives aims to contribute with effect towards the interpretation of data gathered (Ministry of Education, 2017). Collaboration is also seen in well-developed assessment practice to both support and inform next steps of learning (Carr, 1998b). Working in partnership with parents is indeed an underpinning and cornerstone feature of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017), reflected in the third principle of the curriculum framework and woven intrinsically throughout, ultimately giving unique emphasis to this particular area within New Zealand. For example, *Te Whāriki* gives direction to the foundational nature of such relationships noting the importance of teachers developing “meaningful relationships with whānau” and that teachers “respect their [parents] aspirations for their children” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 20). The partnered approach inherent here draws on several key theoretical frameworks such as Kaupapa Māori theory and Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological model highlighting knowledge sharing and meaning-making across contexts (McLachlan, 2017; Ministry of Education, 2017). Concepts of funds of knowledge and “overlapping spheres of interest” (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006, p. 118) are positioned within such theories recognising the positive impact collaborative relationships have on children’s learning and development and the assessment of this.

Assessment in New Zealand is “consistent with the principles of *Te Whāriki*” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 64) and assumes a holistic view of a child and an individualised learning journey. The original edition of *Te Whāriki* noted that good assessment “should always focus on individual children over a period of time and avoid making comparisons between children” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 29). This stands in contrast to historic international approaches that have tended towards norm-referenced assessments of a comparative nature (Gullo, 2013; Zhang, 2015). Whilst assessment in New Zealand of young children avoids making unnecessary comparisons the engagement and use of criterion-based assessment and ipsative assessment has been highlighted by McLachlan (2018) as holding increasing wider relevancy here as the sector comes to consider effective ways of realising the vision of the newly revised curriculum.

Uniquely adding further to the key features of assessment in the New Zealand context are culturally relevant approaches, embedded and grounded in Māori worldviews and given voice through *Kei Tua o te Pae / Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* (Arndt & Tesar, 2015; Ministry of Education, 2009b; Rameka, 2011). Fundamental to effective assessment for Māori is a collaborative platform in which whānau can assume a partnership role in nurturing the mana of their tamariki (children; Rameka, 2007; 2011). Quality assessment practice for Māori is understood for the role it contributes towards developing Māori identity in children, especially in terms of the links made to whakapapa (genealogy) and Māori worldviews (Rameka, 2007). Assessment of Māori by Māori, known as a kaupapa Māori assessment approach, is recognised as uniquely reflective of Māori ways of ‘knowing and doing’ (Rameka, 2012). Quality assessment practice for Māori therefore requires an understanding and embedding of Māori values and philosophies throughout the process of assessment, recognising, celebrating, and communicating learning in culturally rich and meaningful ways.

Emphasised also to a larger degree in the New Zealand context are quality assessment practices that promote the visibility of learning and bring the re-visiting of learning further to the forefront (Arndt & Tesar, 2015). *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) gives guidance in this sense towards teaching practice that is “attentive to learning and able to make this visible through assessment practices that give children agency and mana” (p. 59), whilst also emphasising opportunities for children to revisit their learning as a means to support “learning conversations and... self- and peer assessment” (p. 63).

In summary, there are many shared features of quality assessment practice internationally and in the New Zealand context. Table 1 (p. 18) outlines key features of assessment that are described above as well as other features identified in the extant literature. The table further shows the extent to which features are emphasised and enacted internationally and nationally.

Table 1.

Quality features of assessment highlighted in international and New Zealand literature

	International	NZ
Hold clear value for children	X	X
Have a clear vision of assessment purpose(s)	X	X
Undertaken for a range of purposes	X	*
Purpose of assessment formative for teaching and learning	--	X
Align method and purpose	X	X
Involve multiple methods	X	* +
Predominantly learning stories	--	X
Comparative, norm-referenced	X	*
Informed by the way in which young children grow	X	X
Informed by socio-cultural theory	X	X
Significant focus on socio-cultural theory	--	X
Acknowledge, reflect, and document contextual features	X	X
Awareness of culture, cultural sensitivity, and cultural and linguistic considerations	X	X
Equitable processes to ensure assessments are fair, culturally sensitive, and linguistically and developmentally appropriate	X	**
Significant focus on culturally relevant approaches	--	X
Naturalistic observation	X	X
Formal observations	X	* +
Informal observations	X	X
On-going	X	X
Familiar and naturalistic contexts	X	X
Child-centred approach	X	X
Focus on strengths and needs	X	X
Views intrinsically curious and capable learners	X	X
Capture authentic, process based, learning	X	X
Capture curriculum and child interests	X	X
Gather multiple perspectives	X	X
Significant focus on child's own voice and information from families	--	X
Documentation and the sharing of assessment information important	X	X
Focus on making learning visible to children and re-visiting learning	--	X
Use of photographs or video	X	X

Note.

-- Feature not strongly emphasised in international literature

* Feature not strongly emphasised in domestic literature

** Although domestic literature focuses on equitable processes and has a strong emphasis on cultural relevance, developmentally appropriate is not strongly emphasised

+ Feature given increasing emphasis in revised 2017 edition of *Te Whariki*.

2.4. Enactment of *Te Whāriki* and learning stories

As described in the Introduction chapter, the history of *Te Whāriki* is intertwined with the development and emergence of learning stories. As an assessment approach designed specifically to support enactment of *Te Whāriki*, learning stories were originally developed to support observation of key learning dispositions aligned with the five curriculum strands. These dispositions included courage and curiosity, trust, perseverance, confidence, and responsibility, which were associated with wellbeing, belonging, exploration, communication, and contribution. Today, learning stories are used more broadly to cover a range of learning dispositions, behaviours, skills, and domain knowledge, and are written on a range of topics (McLaughlin et al., 2016). Differing goals or focus areas might guide learning stories; for example, a teacher might choose to focus on “documenting expertise at one moment in time”, “finding planning directions”, or “focusing on an interest” (Carr & Lee, 2012, p. 132). As the early childhood education sector comes to more fully consider the implementation of the newly revised curriculum it has been suggested the 20 learning outcomes listed in *Te Whāriki* will give direction to assessment with a move away from what has been perceived as “backward mapping written narratives to *Te Whāriki*” (Ministry of Education, n.d.).

The learning stories approach is grounded in a contemporary understanding of effective assessment principles and involved the re-conceptualisation of previous assessment methods used in New Zealand (e.g. skills-checklists, scales, developmental milestones; Arndt & Tesar, 2015; Carr, 2001). While observations of young children’s learning have always held importance in New Zealand, learning stories have increased emphasis on collaboration, relational and contextual learning, and pedagogical documentation, leading to new ways of assessing and sharing learning (Goodman, 2015; Te One, 2002). In light of the two decades that have passed since learning stories were first introduced, the following two sections of this review focus on synthesising shared understandings and critiquing observed challenges of this assessment approach.

2.5. The learning story approach: Everyday enactment and strengths

Since the introduction of learning stories in the 1990s a wide body of well-regarded literature has emerged. This has however included a limited body of published research that directly addresses outcomes from learning stories, as identified by McLaughlin et al. (2015) in their review of the learning story literature (excluding material such as books, conference papers, dissertations) which noted a total body of 42 articles, of which only nine focused on research about learning stories. In reviewing the current published literature on learning stories, several key themes emerge that highlight everyday practices

for using learning stories and identifies strengths that learning stories contribute to the early childhood sector including flexibility in form and focus and accessible documentation for children and families, alongside other benefits. The following section provides an overview of these areas. This is then followed by a section to synthesise the challenges and limitations that have been reported with the learning story approach.

2.5.1. Flexibility in form and focus

Learning stories take many different forms in terms of focus, style, content, and audience (McLachlan et al., 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2016; Niles, 2016). Diversity of assessment practice has been noted both within and across services, and measures of quality have also varied (Education Review Office, 2007, 2013a). In terms of commonly shared features across learning stories, Hatherly and Sands (2002) suggest the presence of a credit-based narrative that celebrates significant learning and captures the child-in-context. Southcott (2015) adds that a notice-recognise-respond format is often used. The documented inclusion of 'responding' to observed learning gives support to on-going planning, highlighting a broad understanding that learning stories can, and should, contribute to a wider teaching and learning planning process (Hatherly, 2006; Hatherly & Sands, 2002; McLachlan et al., 2013). Learning stories may be standalone assessments, celebrating significant moments, or may be linked with episodes of learning deepening in complexity or broadening in context (Carr, 2001; Cooper, 2009). The use of learning stories to support continuity of learning has been recognised to focus attention towards children's meaning-making and strengthen understanding of learning-based ideas and relationships (Cowie & Carr, 2009).

A further feature of note drawn from literature recognises that the way learning stories are documented is different and unique to different settings, teachers, and audiences. The inclusion of a 'parent' or 'child' voice, actively contributing to the story documented, is a broadly common feature aspired for in practice (Carr, 2001, Pennells, 2017). The inclusion of wider voices within a documented narrative is particularly recognised for the contribution this can make towards the co-construction of meaning-making (Carr, 2001) and the role this plays in building collaborative partnerships with parents and families (Pennells, 2017). Pedagogical documentation or the process and content of making learning visible, as noted earlier, is a cornerstone defining feature of learning stories (Buchanan, 2011).

2.5.2. Accessible documentation for children and families

Documentation of assessment is understood by Carr and Lee (2012) as pivotal to the construction of positive learner identities, that is the way in which children feel about themselves as learners and the extent to which they describe themselves as learners. Learning stories have been described as “similar to holding up a magnifying glass, or taking a picture with a camera, allowing the moment of learning to be frozen and / or bringing it further into focus” (Southcott, 2015 p. 38). Understood from this position, the practice of learning stories is authentic, enabling the whole child to be considered from a holistic, responsive, and relational perspective (Carr, 2001; Cooper, 2009), and supports a process whereby learning can be made both visible and accessible to the child and their family.

In addition to the contribution documented learning stories can have on children’s developing learner identities, they also provide the means and medium with which learning can be shared with others (Cooper, 2009; Pennells, 2017). Documentation therefore holds significance in supporting collaborative partnerships, encouraging involvement of significant others, and inviting wider interpretations of observed learning (Carr & Lee, 2012; Daniels, 2013; Hatherly & Sands, 2002; Pennells, 2017; Whyte, 2010). Building on these understandings, Zhang (2015) considers pedagogical documentation as both a “tool of observation and interpretation” (p. 71).

Collections of learning stories are commonly collated into individualised portfolios, or online e-portfolios (Boardman, 2007; Hooker, 2016). When accessible to children, such portfolios hold a key role in supporting young children to re-visit their learning, promoting a sense of agency and enhanced mana (Anthony, McLachlan, & Poh, 2015; Carr, 2011; Carr & Lee, 2012; Carr, May, Podmore, Cubey, Hatherly, & Macartney, 2002; Hooker, 2016). Carr (2011), Daniels (2013), Hatherly (2006) and Southcott (2015) all pinpoint ‘re-visiting’ as a platform for enhancing critical thinking skills in children, as well as developing learner memory and identity. Boardman (2007) further contends that learning story documentation is pivotal to supporting children to engage with and reflect on their learning, emphasising the connection between documentation and learning. A growing body of literature (Hooker, 2015, 2016; Goodman, 2013a, 2013b, 2015) highlights the potential enhancement of accessibility and subsequent engagement, for both parents and children that e-portfolios can contribute with respect to documentation and learning stories.

2.5.3. Other strengths and benefits

The use of photographs or digital media is recognised as common practice in the documentation of learning stories (Boardman, 2007; Mitchell, 2008; Pennells, 2017). Outside of adding strength and visibility to recognised and shared learning (Carr & Lee, 2012), the inclusion of such imagery offers a tangible artefact and platform from which other perspectives and interpretations of the narrated learning can be further explored and revisited (Whyte, 2010). As previously noted, sourcing multiple perspectives on learning openly recognises that there exist diverse interpretations to children's learning and acknowledges the complex relational and inter-subjective lens from which learning stories are written and viewed (Arndt & Tesar, 2015). In this sense, learning stories are considered by some to "make space for uncertainty" (Arndt & Tesar, 2015, p. 78) promoting the development of changing understandings in interpreting learning. The overall contribution that learning stories can make towards the ongoing formative assessment of young children therefore supports the design of a responsive curriculum which builds on and connects meaningful and personalised learning for children (Hatherly & Sands, 2002).

2.6. Enactment challenges and limitations of the learning story approach

A critical analysis of the literature highlights a range of challenges and limitations that impact on the implementation of learning stories as an effective assessment approach in early childhood education. Collectively, authors such as Anthony, McLachlan, and Poh (2015), Mawson (2011), Niles (2016), and Zhang (2015) suggest that there are barriers that serve to inhibit the full enactment of this assessment approach within some settings. This has led writers, such as Pennells (2017), to consider a potential inconsistency between the theoretical framework of learning stories and the everyday practice of this approach. Such implementation concerns bring to the fore consideration of the features that determine what might be considered a 'good' learning story, and the specific practices that are deemed to hold particular value. Although this body of literature is relatively small and more research is needed to gain clarity, noted limitations need to be considered in terms of the impact they may hold for quality assessment practices.

2.6.1. Environmental barriers

Several studies identify time as a limiting factor associated with the effective practice of learning stories (Blaklock, 2010; Cameron, McLachlan, & Rawlins, 2016; Mawson, 2011, Nyland & Alfayez, 2012). Mawson's (2011) small-scale New Zealand study, examining the practice of learning stories in the context of Playcentre (a parent lead early childhood setting), highlighted challenges and constraints in relation to sufficient meeting time and

space. These two factors were considered to limit the collegial sharing of assessments and collaboration (Mawson, 2011). Carr and Lee (2012) acknowledge the differing goals, interests, and practices that sit behind learning stories, and highlight challenges in developing connected chains of stories that capture continuity of learning and child progress in settings where teachers may not have opportunities to fully discuss or share children's assessments with each other. Connecting episodes of learning and assessment together and highlighting learning across time is also affected by the consistency of staff within settings (Mawson, 2011).

Blaiklock (2010) posits that the physical time needed to write a learning story is "considerable" (p. 7), with implications on available teacher time as well as the timeframe within which stories can then be shared and next steps implemented in a timely way. Pennells' (2017) case study, exploring the perspectives of five parents and five teachers in relation to parents role in assessment, highlighted challenges in practice for parents when trying to contribute to documented learning that had already taken place. Niles' (2016) case study within one early childhood education setting with 12 teacher participants also highlighted that a lengthy period of time could exist between teachers writing a learning story and parents reading the learning story. One suggestion from this study was that a reduction in the length of time between writing a story and sharing a story could work with effect to improve reciprocal communication between teachers and parents on children's learning. The increasing emergence of online e-portfolios is acknowledged in literature as contributing a potential countering effect to the concern of time delayed conveyance with parents through the sharing of learning in more 'real time' (Higgins & Cherrington, 2017; Hooker, 2015). The research emerging from this particular area is also demonstrating positive shifts in parental contribution and engagement with learning stories when shared through online platforms (Higgins & Cherrington, 2017; Hooker, 2015, 2016; Goodman, 2013a, 2013b, 2015).

Alongside the time suggested as needed to write a quality story is the documented barrier of limited administrative, non-contact time available to teachers. Supporting this notion are findings from Cameron, McLachlan, and Rawlins' (2016) study in which 380 qualified and registered New Zealand teachers were surveyed to explore understandings, beliefs and practices in relation to assessing four-year-old children's learning. The findings from this study found that 43.4% of the participant teachers ranked the limited amount of non-contact time as the highest barrier impacting assessment practice, with learning stories being the main approach undertaken to assessment. Findings from this study were slightly lower than those determined by Mitchell (2008) who concluded that 59% of their 401 New

Zealand teachers surveyed ranked insufficient time as the prime barrier to quality assessment practice. Additional findings in Loggenberg's (2011) small-scale study of 25 surveyed teachers, and further by Niles (2015), highlighted competing demands on limited non-contact time for teachers. Aligning with Blaiklock's (2010) assertion that writing learning stories is time consuming, are findings by Nyland and Alfayez (2012), who explored the introductory practice of this approach across three international contexts with pre-service teachers. These researchers concluded that "learning stories are not necessarily an easy tool to use" (p. 401) due to their time-consuming nature. Suitable data collection tools such as cameras and videos, and the confidence and competence of teachers in using these are also identified in literature as barriers to the effective implementation of learning stories (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2005; Boardman, 2007; Carr, 2005).

2.6.2. Difficulty implementing aspirations of collaboration and contribution

Collaborating with children's families and significant others are key hallmarks of learning stories (Feltham, 2005; Pennells, 2017; Whyte, 2010). Despite the importance of gathering multiple voices to support meaning-making, several studies have described barriers to capturing these, especially contributions from parents and whānau (Mitchell, 2008; Niles, 2015; Pennells, 2017; Stuart, Aitken, Gould, & Meade, 2008). Identified barriers include modes of communication, parental time and availability, as well as perceptions that learning stories may appear as already completed and belonging to the teacher (Gorinski & Fraser, 2006; Hooker, 2015, 2016; Niles, 2015; Pennells, 2017; Stuart et al., 2008; Whyte, 2010). Whyte (2010) views limited parental input as an outworking of a model of wider unequal power relationships in the way learning stories are often shared with families and how families perceive learning stories. Pennells' (2017) research resonates with this whilst also highlighting parental unfamiliarity with both the curriculum framework and the opportunity to hold an active role in assessment as contributing features negating parents power to fully participate in learning stories in the manner intended. Such findings indirectly highlight a wider need for research to scope further the perspective of parents and teachers on the features they value within learning stories in order to consider the potential opportunities offered and ways of implementing this assessment approach with greater effect.

2.6.3. Educator experience and theoretical orientation

In their overview of learning stories, Arndt and Tesar (2015) assert that, "learning stories perform *Te Whāriki's* framework and guiding principles" (p. 76). However, while the approach is guided by the curriculum, it is the understanding and skill of teachers which

transforms the approach into practice. Teacher skill and knowledge, particularly in relation to theoretical grounding and recognition of key learning, is required for teachers to engage effectively with learning stories (Niles, 2016). Nyland and Alfayez (2012) highlight the complexities inherent within learning stories suggesting that commitment and professional guidance is needed to effectively implement this assessment approach. Developing knowledge and skill working within a sociocultural view of assessment, and acquiring understanding of a dispositional learning approach, are considered essential skills when implementing the learning stories approach (Niles, 2016; Nyland & Alfayez, 2012). To this end, McLachlan et al. (2013) highlight both professional expertise and sociocultural understanding as pivotal to noticing, recognising, and responding to children's learning.

Within the New Zealand context, an enduring barrier towards developing effective expertise with this assessment approach is the lack of universal government funded professional development programmes (Niles, 2015, 2016; Perkins, 2013; Smith, 2015). This barrier is compounded in settings with unqualified staff who likely hold less knowledge about assessment than qualified teachers (Mawson, 2011; McLachlan, 2011; Niles, 2016; Smith, 2015). Learning story assessment is suggested by Niles (2016) to rely on teacher knowledge, understanding, awareness, and skill, all of which this researcher collectively denotes as complex and pivotally reliant on universal access to professional learning and development.

The learning story approach to assessment has been considered complex and multi-faceted. Learning stories are certainly not a 'tool' in a traditional sense of inputting collected data and obtaining referenced outcomes (Nyland & Alfayez, 2012). Acknowledging the complexities of this assessment approach, Niles (2016) suggests that there is no clear "blueprint for assessment" (p. 92). Whilst the revised edition of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) works to provide further direction for learning stories and broadens the scope for assessment beyond the sole observation focused lens stated in the original 1996 version (McLachlan, 2018), a lack of clear working guidelines on how to write a good learning story remains. Arguably contribution and direction for best practice would come from *Kei Tua o te Pae / Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2007a, 2007b, 2009a, 2009b) however perpetuating low engagement with this resource has been noted (ERO, 2007; Mitchell, 2008) alongside emerging critique that the exemplars potentially fail to guide teachers adequately enough in this area (Perkins, 2013). To this end, Niles (2016) suggests that "without a definitive description of how a learning story should be written teachers are left somewhat to their own devices to try and make sense of the assessment framework" (p.

92). Such findings affirm the need for clear guidance and ongoing professional development in supporting effective learning story practice.

2.6.4. Content challenges

The 'story' content of learning stories is reported to be diverse and broad in scope, paralleling the distinctive, contextual learning of children (Dunn, 2004; Hatherly & Sands, 2002). McLaughlin et al. (2015) analysed 42 articles about learning stories within a review of literature scoping quality features of learning stories. Findings from their review showed that children's skills, behaviours, and learning dispositions were all individually or collectively highlighted in literature about learning stories, however learning dispositions were more often emphasised. Key features identified in their literature review were then used as a comparative base when these authors furthered their exploration directly with 11 teachers across one early childhood setting in New Zealand. The study utilised semi-structured interviews to explore the features of learning stories that held importance for participant teachers (McLaughlin et al., 2016). Findings from this study suggested that teachers focused less on learning dispositions and more on capturing significant moments or critical events for children within their learning stories. A wide variety in story focus and content was noted overall from McLaughlin et al. (2016) suggesting flexibility of this assessment approach in practice.

Several studies also suggest broad challenges in relation to noticing and documenting learning in action in terms of process, focus, and content. Mawson's (2011) New Zealand Playcentre based study revealed that the content focus of learning stories in this setting was heavily influenced by the learning personally valued by parent-educators. Specifically, within this study which examined the assessment practice of 16 parent-educators, learning stories predominantly focused on social relationships and interactions. Analysis of semi-structured interviews with the participant parent-educators in this study noted that this specific focus also held high personal value to the parent-educators (Mawson, 2011). A wider analysis by Davis (2006) of learning story practice from 9 teachers within one New Zealand setting noted little depth in narrative assessment content, though teachers in this particular study considered that their practice aligned to the principles of narrative assessment. These findings were reinforced in the surveyed responses of teachers by Cameron, McLachlan, and Rawlins (2016) who highlighted concern that learning stories sometimes fail to recognise learning at the expense of documenting events. An argument presented from Whyte (2010) in this sense is that learning stories are often used in a summative manner rather than a formative nature. Zhang's (2017) comparative research, exploring the experiences and perspectives of 24 practitioners (11 managers and 13

teachers) alongside 11 parents from across 11 New Zealand settings, provides further insight to this issue. One of the concerns highlighted by both parents and teachers in this study was the perceived superficial 'snippet' nature of learning stories and the lack of detailed or substantial information provided on children's learning. Findings from this study suggest that perceptions of adequate depth in terms of content is one of the limitations of this approach that can be experienced in practice.

Anthony, McLachlan, and Poh, (2015) contribute further to understanding challenges in learning story practice, noting missed opportunities for teachers to notice, recognise, and respond specifically to mathematical learning when this was embedded within everyday play. This study suggested restricted assessment practice, linked to teacher knowledge and skill, holding influence over decisions about what to notice and recognise within assessments. Concerns that learning stories do not robustly capture specific domain knowledge are also upheld by Nuttall (2005), further supported by Blaiklock (2008, 2010, 2013) and reinforced by Zhang (2015, 2017), who all call for a wider-scale evaluation on the effectiveness of learning stories.

2.6.5. Additional limitations in practice

The credit-based nature of learning stories, highlighting children as competent and confident learners, holds influence over the way in which learning story content is selected and framed. Dunn (2004) recognises the inclusive strength this feature of learning stories can offer to children with learning support needs, however cautions that assessments should also accurately capture children's progress and potential support needs. Specifically, Dunn (2004) notes the need for assessments to credibly inform future goals and work with effect across multidisciplinary teams and educational sectors. The revised edition of *Te Whāriki* (2017) places emphasis on the formative assessment process to identify "whether additional support is required" (p. 64) and considers this a core element of the assessment process. However, a remaining issue within literature continues to direct concern towards learning stories not supporting recognition of, or giving clarity to, the full picture of children in terms of needs and skill development (Dunn, 2004; Niles, 2016). In this sense, balancing a credit-based approach with the acknowledgement of learning or developmental needs is a potential challenge to navigate when working with learning stories (Williamson, Cullen, & Lepper, 2006). As such, caution and critical reflection are advocated by Zhang (2015) in order to preserve a broad and robust assessment scope. To this end, Niles (2016) suggests, that quality practice takes "time and effort to understand and make work on a daily basis" (p. 89).

An additional recurring theme in the literature considers the lack of specific direction for how often a learning story should be written. Several studies suggest common practice, and even policy, is to write one story per month for each child (Blaiklock, 2010; Loggenberg, 2011; Mawson, 2011; Niles, 2015, 2016). The formulaic nature of this understanding, and a suggested accompanying model of accountability, is considered limiting and contributory towards inauthentic assessment practices and superficial 'stories' (Mawson, 2011; Loggenberg, 2011).

Finally, further concern reflected in literature centres debate on the effectiveness of learning stories (Blaiklock, 2008; Zhang, 2015, 2017). Blaiklock (2008, 2013) questions a lack of measurable evidence and objectivity, and suggests limits of this approach in relation to effectiveness, validity and credibility. Notably, Blaiklock (2008, 2010) contends that the general practice of learning stories falls short of demonstrating children's learning and development over time, and frequently omits the inclusion of perspectives from others. This viewpoint suggests a lack of use of learning stories as a formative assessment tool, as evidenced in planning (Blaiklock, 2008, 2010; Fler & Quinones, 2013; McLachlan et al., 2013). The Education Review Office's (2007) report on the quality of assessment also foregrounds similar concerns noting that for one-third of services learning story practice needed further development to reflect the principles of *Te Whāriki* and, for over half of services, practice needed strengthening to better inform learning. As core tenets of the learning story approach, the omission of these elements in practice is worthy of further investigation, particularly in terms of exploring what core practices hold value and why, and how practice continues to align itself with the theoretical framework of learning stories.

2.6.6. Stakeholder perceptions on the role and purpose of learning stories

As noted earlier in this review, while *Te Whāriki* outlines a vision for assessment in early childhood education, limited definitive guidelines exist on the implementation of learning stories in practice (McLaughlin et al., 2016). This feature gives rise to differing perceptions about the role and purpose of learning stories, and the value of associated practices (McLachlan et al., 2013). For example, Hatherly and Sands (2002) offer the premise that "good stories typically take place over time... give attention to context and background....[and] not only describe actions they also make feelings and interpretations visible" (p. 9). Yet, detailed understanding of what makes a quality learning story, according to who and for what purpose, is unclear in literature.

Emerging research by McLaughlin et al. (2016) suggests that features valued by teachers include the importance that stories place upon noticing the child as a learner and documenting significant events, although not necessarily dispositionally focused, as well as stories that connect or show continuity of learning over time. The study also highlighted the value that teachers attribute towards a broad range of connections within their learning stories – to parental aspirations, key documents, and to te Ao Māori concepts (McLaughlin et al., 2016). Furthermore, teachers in this study placed value on stories that were well presented with a clear purpose, and those that included children’s voices and reflected their own involvement (McLaughlin et al., 2016). Of particular note in this study was the finding that teachers did not recognise learning stories as the main way they engaged and communicated with families about children’s learning. This finding re-emphasises a notion of difference between the practice of learning stories and the aspirational and theoretical framework which underpins this assessment approach.

The Education Review Office shares a clear vision on the role and purpose of learning stories noting the essentials of quality assessment in terms of informing service programmes and teaching practice, developing partnership with families / whānau, and supporting positive learning outcomes for children (ERO, 2007, 2016). Given the emphasis placed upon partnerships with parents and the desired role they play in children’s assessment (Ministry of Education, 1997, 2017), parent views on valued practices also hold importance. The accompanying body of literature in this area is however sparse. As highlighted earlier in this review, some studies have noted a lack of parental contribution to children’s learning stories suggesting barriers to participation such as time, access, and either the opportunity to contribute, or the style in which this invitation may be perceived by parents (Mitchell, 2008; Pennells, 2017; Stuart et al., 2008; Whyte, 2010).

Zhang’s (2017) comparative study, described earlier in this review, also worked to highlight the valued features of learning stories by parents, teachers, and the Education Review Office. Findings from this study noted that parents placed high value on progression of learning, individualised communication and information sharing, and documentation in terms of layout, photographs, alongside the permanency of a portfolio to keep. Teachers, on the other hand, highlighted the time consuming nature of learning stories, their subjectivity and selectivity in content, and often superficial nature. One shared category of note derived from this study was the area of parent-teacher communication, however each participant group in this study was seen to have a different emphasis. For teachers, importance was placed on the desire to obtain information from

parents on learning in the home context, while for parents it was clear that teachers were their main source of information regarding their children's learning. In contrast, the Education Review Office's evaluation of parents' involvement in assessment of learning was directly associated with parental involvement in learning stories. Building further on this theme, over half of the teachers in Zhang's (2017) study noted the 'insufficient' nature of the learning story approach as a sole assessment method. By comparison, Zhang (2017) highlighted the interchangeable use of the terms 'learning stories' and 'assessment of learning' from the Education Review Office and questions the pivotal stance learning stories holds as the prioritised form of assessment.

Teacher perspectives on the role and purpose of learning stories has also been given voice by Loggenberg (2011) and Niles (2016). Niles' (2016) small scale case study interviewing 6 of a wider 12 participating teachers in one New Zealand early childhood setting directly explored teachers understanding of learning stories as a core assessment approach. Findings from this study highlighted the complexities teachers wrestled with as they searched for a 'good fit' of this approach in meeting the multiple needs and aspirations of both their setting and their own perception of assessment. The lack of general guidelines and clarity on how to write a learning story contributed to the challenges teachers in this setting experienced defining and translating the role and purpose of learning stories into practice. Through the application of a 22-item questionnaire, Loggenberg's (2011) earlier study aimed to gain deeper insight into teachers understanding of the purpose of assessment and approach. Four main purposes for assessment were derived from the teachers in this study. These included helping learners with next step learning, recognising strengths and weaknesses, developing understanding of learner levels achieved, and as a means to adapt and review teaching approaches to meet the learning needs of children. In addition to this, teachers recognised that a key role of assessment was to gather and share information with parents. Loggenberg's (2011) findings foreshadowed that of Niles' (2016) in terms of teachers working to gain clarity on this assessment approach, with teachers in this particular study showing a low uptake in accessing guidance from *Kei Tua o te Pae / Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2007a, 2007b, 2009a, 2009b).

2.7. Summary

The literature reviewed above has emphasised that effective assessment in early childhood education is underpinned by many key features that work towards constructs of quality practice, including the recognition of a clear purpose and an understanding that

assessment should bring benefit to children (McLachlan et al., 2013). Effective assessment practice highlights specific skills, knowledge, and processes (Fraser & McLaughlin, 2016), however stakeholders place differing value on differing aspects of these (McLaughlin et al., 2016; Niles, 2016). Learning stories have broadly been regarded for their contribution as an assessment tool to support the enactment of *Te Whāriki*. In keeping with the aspiration that individual settings will develop their own meaningful approach to assessment, the theoretical framework guiding learning stories omits specific direction towards aspects of practice. Subsequently, this literature review has recognised diversity in practice. Despite the wide-scale use of learning stories, this review has noted the limited body of research that examines teacher and parent perspectives on personally valued learning story features. This study aims to contribute to this identified gap by exploring what features and practices of learning stories are particularly valued by teachers and parents. In working to identify and consider potential similarities and differences from these scoped perspectives, this study offers a platform for wider discussion on what meaningful practice may look like to these key partners.

Chapter Three

Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This study aims to identify what features and practices associated with learning stories are valued by teachers and parents and to consider potential similarities and / or differences that may present within these stakeholder perspectives. A qualitative research approach is considered most appropriate in meeting this aim. In this chapter I will provide a brief overview of the main features of qualitative research and the constructivist paradigm that was used to guide this study. Data collection methods will be discussed, and setting and participant information shared and collated. This chapter concludes with an overview of how data was analysed and discussion on key ethical considerations.

This study was guided by the following three research questions:

1. What are teachers' perspectives of the key quality features and practices in learning stories?
2. What are parents' perspectives of the key quality features and practices in learning stories?
3. What is the alignment between teacher and parent perspectives?

3.2. Research Design

3.2.1. Qualitative research

Recognised for its open-ended exploratory approach, qualitative research draws on an emic perspective, seeking the subjective views of others from within the population it involves (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Working inductively and deductively to develop understanding and uncover the meaning of social phenomena qualitative researchers “assume social reality is a human creation” and seek to “interpret and contextualise meanings from people, beliefs, and practices” (Baskarada, 2014, p. 1). This study aimed to develop understanding of the key features and practices that were most valued by parents and teachers in relation to the use of learning stories as an assessment tool in early childhood education. In seeking to understand these perspectives and explore how teachers and parents constructed and attributed meaning a qualitative research paradigm was considered most suitable. This research orientation enabled rich, descriptive data to be captured supporting the attribution of value and quality in learning stories to be explored as a central phenomenon (Patton, 2002).

3.2.2. Constructivist approach

This study adopts a constructivist approach as a guiding framework underpinning research design. At the core of constructivism is the belief that knowledge and meaning-making is contextually situated whereby individual realities are social constructions of the individual mind and, as such, different constructions may exist (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A key tenet within this perspective is the disregard for a universal or singular truth and the innateness of individual meaning (Charmaz, 2000). As such, constructivism values multiples perspectives and views knowledge and understanding as unique to the social construction of particular individuals (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006).

3.2.3 A case study design

A case study approach was selected for this study given the strength this methodology provides in terms of insight into specific issues and complex, context-bound phenomena (Stake, 2005). Yin (2003) and Merriam (1998) suggest that this approach is most appropriate for exploratory studies that seek to define topics broadly and those which aspire to multiple sources of evidence to discover insight and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied. The case approach in this study is instrumental, designed to examine specific themes in order “to provide insight into a common issue” (Stake, 1995, p. 445). Merriam (1998) and Yin (2003) suggest that the inclusion of multiple cases in a study strengthens the credibility of induced conclusions and enables differences to be explored within and between cases. Drawing on this tenet, the methodology of this study initially proposed to adopt a multiple embedded case study approach enabling a within-case analysis and cross-case analysis to be performed on the data collected across the two selected settings. Although this was the proposed methodology, upon analysis no notable differences were found between settings by same stakeholder groups and therefore settings were collapsed with data aggregated to represent one stakeholder group for parents and one for teachers. This change moved the research design towards a single case study with embedded units. This process will be further described in the results chapter.

3.3. Method

3.3.1. Recruitment and setting

The selection of settings for this study was underpinned by purposeful, criterion-based sampling. Purposeful sampling is recognised for allowing the specific selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2015; Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, & Young, 2018).

Criterion sampling is one of the most common purposeful sampling strategies supporting the selection of cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance (Suri, 2011). The inclusion criteria for this study required early childhood education settings to be community-based and not part of a wider business franchise or national body, and to also have a minimum Education Review Office evaluation rating of 'well placed' on their most recent review. This criterion aimed to focus the study on autonomous settings with externally recognised effective assessment practices in place supporting the phenomena of interest to be explored. This features gives confidence to the study that learning story practice was well embedded in existing assessment approaches in a localised and contextual manner and not an emerging practice.

Using a list of local settings generated from an internet search and then refining these according to their recent Education Review Office reviews, a list of nine suitable settings were identified from the researcher's region. Two of these were eliminated due to their unique position at distinct local services (a hospital and polytechnic). These were considered to serve more specific population bases potentially narrowing scope and focus for this study. The remaining seven settings were randomly ordered and the first two settings were invited for participation. One centre was not in a position to accept the extended invitation at which point the third centre on the list was approached giving two confirmed settings for this study. Centre managers were initially approached and the study overviewed through discussion and the dissemination of an information sheet (Appendix A). A *Centre Owner / Manager Permission Form* was signed to confirm participation in the study (Appendix B). Centre owners / managers initially discussed the participant opportunity with teachers and then potential parent participants. Settings were assured of anonymity with no identifiable information being shared, as such the two selected settings have been referred to as Setting A and Setting B. Setting A is a mixed-age suburban setting, licensed for up to 27 children with four qualified teachers. Setting B is an inner city early childhood centre, licensed for up to 40 children, and with five qualified teachers.

3.3.2. Participants

A cap of ten participants from each setting was pre-agreed on by the researcher and her supervisors. Sample sizes in qualitative research tend to be small and as they work for depth of analysis (Vasileiou et al., 2018). The sample size in this study was considered appropriate for a novice researcher (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2006) whilst large enough to support a quest for data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). A total of ten participants, inclusive of both teachers and parents, chose to participate from setting A and nine from

setting B. All qualified teachers from both settings were first invited to participate in the study. This involved four teachers from Setting A and five teachers from Setting B. Parents from both settings were then invited to participate within the remaining spaces at each setting. Parent participants from Setting A subsequently totalled six, and four for Setting B. Both teachers and parents were provided with an information sheet detailing the research project and outlining participation requirements (Appendix C and D). Time was provided for both teachers and parents to consider participation and ask questions to support informed choice making. Consent forms were then completed by each selected participant (Appendix E and F). Participation was voluntary and the confidentiality and anonymity of participants assured. In order to de-identify data and preserve the anonymity of participants in the study pseudonyms were created for all participants. Table 2 provides a summary description of teacher participant profiles and Table 3 provides a similar overview of parent participants.

Table 2.

Summary description of teacher participant profiles

Setting A				
Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Teaching qualification	Total years teaching
Joy	Female	NZ European (NZE)	Bachelor degree	9
Rachel	Female	NZE	Diploma	20+
Angela	Female	NZE	Bachelor degree	7.5
Paula	Female	NZE	Bachelor degree	2.9
Setting B				
Amanda	Female	NZE	Bachelor degree	5
Annette	Female	NZE	Bachelor degree	7
Chloe	Female	NZE	Bachelor degree and Graduate diploma	10
Sarah	Female	NZE	Bachelor degree	7
Mikaela	Female	NZE	Bachelor degree	10

Table 3.

Summary description of parent participant profiles

Setting A			
Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	How long selected child has attended setting
Hannah	Female	NZE	18mths
Nina	Female	NZE	3yrs
Sheena	Female	Indian	2.5 years
Debbie	Female	NZE	4yrs
Stacey	Female	NZE	5mths
Mary	Female	NZE	3.5yrs
Setting B			
Deanna	Female	NZE	8mths
Carol	Female	Indian	2yrs
Joanna	Female	NZE	2yrs
Laura*	Female	NZE	2yrs

* Both a parent and teacher in Setting B but contributing as a parent

3.3.3. Data collection procedures and tools

Data for this study was collected through individual interviews. Interviews are considered useful in gathering rich descriptive narrative data that explores the views, experiences and beliefs of individuals (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). This type of data collection is recognised as valuable when seeking to understand social phenomena where insights are required from individual participants. For this study the method of semi-structured interviews was chosen. This method involves a general structure decided in advance, often with the inclusion of probe questions (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Semi-structured interviews, drawing on an open framework and supporting a focused yet flexible conversation, are well suited to small scale research (Patton, 2002).

The present study replicated use of the teacher interview tool and the supporting protocol from *The Learning Stories Project* (McLaughlin et al., 2016; Appendix G). Building from the teacher interview tool a paired interview and supporting protocol was developed for parents (Appendix H). As an elicitation tool, both interviews included 4 core questions with associated prompts, alongside one open ended final question, that captured parent and teacher views on two pre-selected learning stories that they were

asked to bring to their interviews. The criteria for selection was to identify one learning story that was considered 'good' and one which was considered in 'need of improvement' from the perspectives of the teachers and parents. Individual teacher and parent perspectives into valued practices and quality features were given central focus in the semi-structured interviews. Of the four core questions three aligned across both the teacher and parent interview tool. The interview question of difference in the teacher interview sought to delve deeper into the features of learning stories that had influenced each teacher's choice of stories to share. In the parent interview, this question of difference was designed to scope perspectives on what parents thought their child liked the most about learning stories in their portfolio. Interviews took place on-site in each setting. These were between 20-30 minutes in duration and were audio recorded. Interview data was out-sourced for professional transcription following the signing of a *Transcribers Confidentiality Agreement* (Appendix I). Individual transcripts were shared with participants and a *Transcript Release Authority* (Appendix J) signed prior to use of individual data being cited in this study.

3.3.4. Data analysis

Data analysis involved an iterative process of reviewing and organising interview transcript data into identifiable themes to define what features and practices associated with learning stories were valued by teachers and parents and associated with perspectives of a good learning story. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework of thematic analysis was drawn upon and applied as a way to identify these patterns and themes. This framework directs the following phases of action:

Step 1: Developing familiarity with the data

Step 2: Data reduction and generation of initial codes

Step 3: Searching codes for common topics and themes

Step 4: Reviewing, modifying, collapsing, and developing preliminary themes

Step 5: Final refinement and definition of themes

Study-Specific Step: Within- case and cross case analysis of themes

Step 6: Write-up (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As shown in the outlined process, an additional study-specific step was added to accommodate the case study design. During step 1 familiarity with the body of data was attained through reading and re-reading all interview transcripts. Brief notes were made of early impressions. During step 2 of the process, codes were both inductively drawn from data through the generation of initial codes, as well as considered through systematic application of a-priori codes established by McLaughlin et al. (2016) and

through review of the literature. Appendix K outlines the a-priori and emerging codes at this initial point of analysis. The researcher continued the process of reflective journaling during data reduction, recording impressions, highlighting patterns and emerging ideas. This reflective journaling served towards the researcher's practice of reflexivity enhancing measures of this study's confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). During step 3 codes were reviewed and sorted to identify common topics using an iterative process. At the end of this step the codes had been organised into broader descriptive themes. During step 4 the data associated with each broad preliminary theme was uniquely colour coded and considered in context of the wider data set to determine final coherence and clarity of theme. This process involved collapsing and modifying preliminary themes and identifying sub-themes. The final refinement and defining of the themes was undertaken in step 5 with the aim of "identifying the 'essence' of what each theme is about" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). Key themes were initially established within each setting and separately coded from data collected from both teachers and parents, firstly on the stakeholder unit level within each case. During the study-specific step, defined themes were cross-analysed and compared with each other using a within case and a cross-case analysis approach. When no distinguishing features of difference emerged between settings for same stakeholder groups, data was collapsed merging the two settings together for reporting purposes and considering all parents as one stakeholder group and all teachers as the other. The comparison of teacher and parent perspectives included the qualitative difference in which aspects of learning stories were valued as well as the emphasis or extent to which similar areas were valued. This part of the analysis was based on the frequency of comments on key themes for the different stakeholder groups.

The overall approach of the data analysis sought to explore and highlight common threads, differences, and relationships in order to create and develop ideas and understandings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Guba's (1981) construct of an external 'audit trail' to strengthen the accuracy of data and preliminary findings has been supported in this study through the overt sharing of data and analysis in an ongoing manner with two Massey University supervisors. This feature has contributed towards the dependability and stability of the data presented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.4. Ethical considerations

This research study was assessed as low risk and evaluated by peer review (4000018632) adhering to the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC) guidelines (Appendix L). Confidentiality and privacy, and informed and voluntary

consent, were at the forefront of consideration during the design of this study. To mitigate ethical risk and ensure safe and knowledgeable participation in this study informed consent was gained by all participants prior to any involvement in the study. No pre-existing or coercive relationship between the researcher and the research settings or participants existed enabling participation to be considered voluntary and to avoid harm. As noted earlier, confidentiality and anonymity of both setting and participants was given dedicated focus and followed specific actions in order to de-identify data. No identifiable data has therefore been included in the final study.

Audio data obtained from participant interviews was securely stored electronically on a single password protected computer and hard copy data stored in a locked cabinet. Data will be disposed of in accordance to the regulations of the MUHEC following a two-year period after the completion of this study. Cultural considerations were discussed with each centre manager and respect for diversity and culture was maintained at all times during interviews and interactions within each setting. Interviews occurred onsite the selected settings however participants were offered an alternate location of their choice should this have been their preference.

3.5. Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the methodology that has underpinned this study. A description of the constructivist approach employed to guide this study has been included highlighting the researcher's theoretical position. Participant and setting information has been outlined ensuring participant anonymity and without compromising setting identity. The data gathering method of interviews and the accompanying tools and protocols that lay central to this process have been described. Data analysis, and the supporting framework for this, has been introduced and detailed to provide a clear envisaging of process towards the core themes that will be presented in the next chapter. The chapter concludes with key ethical considerations and decisions made to ensure this study adhered to the *Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations Involving Human Participants* (Massey University, 2017).

Chapter Four

Results

4.1. Introduction

This study aimed to identify which features and practices associated with learning stories were valued by teachers and parents. Semi-structured interviews carried out with nine teachers and ten parents across two early childhood settings offered the opportunity to explore differing perspectives on what was deemed to make a good learning story. Thematic analysis of data for each setting and stakeholder group revealed more similarities than differences across the two settings. Where differences did occur, this was more likely to be between the different stakeholder groups of teachers and parents. Results are presented according to emerging themes within key areas, and comparisons of the teacher and parent perspectives on learning stories and quality features. Due to the similarity of data, findings from the two settings have been integrated. The results begin with an overview of the 15 key topics that emerged from coding and the frequency with which these were mentioned by teachers and parents. This is followed by direct comparisons of teacher and parent perspectives on the top 10 key areas related to the differing aspects and viewpoints on what features are valued in a learning story. The chapter ends with a summary of five key insights emerging from the findings.

4.2. Examining the key topics for teachers and parents

Coding procedures resulted in 15 key topics that were identified by teachers and parents. However, it is noted that these topics occurred to differing degrees and at times with differing conviction, across the parent and teacher groups in both settings. Table 4 (p. 41) presents these topics ranked in terms of frequency of comments from the most commented on to the least commented on for teachers, alongside the associated ranking of these topics for the parents.

Table 4.

Features and practices associated with learning stories: Ranking of topics aligned to recurring comment and emphasis by teacher and parent participants

Topic	Ranking of Comments	
	Teacher	Parent
Learning made visible	1	6
Style and presentation	2	1
Different types of stories with a variety of purposes	3	4
Personally meaningful stories to the child	4	2
Holistic, strengths-based image of child	5	13
Structure	6	7
Connection for parent or teacher	7	8
Connects to a cycle of learning and next steps	8	15
Relationships made visible	9	11
Curriculum links	10	5
Multiple perspectives	11	14
Perceived 'have to's' and 'must do's'	12	10
Child's voice	13	12
Parent voice	14	9
Informal sharing of stories	15	3

As seen in the table, the topics that that were identified most (or least) frequently for teachers and parents were different. It is important to note that teachers or parents mention of a topic may not mean a shared perspective, as will be explored further in the next section. Related to frequency of topics being mentioned, teachers had an emphasis on making learning visible, which was identified less often by parents. Some parents talked about the informal sharing of learning stories with their child as being a highly valued feature while informal sharing was infrequently mentioned by teachers. In contrast, both teachers and parents more frequently talked about style and presentation of learning stories as being important considerations, and placed high valued on stories that held personal meaning to a child. It was also of particular note that both teachers and parents recognised that learning stories are written to serve a number of differing purposes and were both largely united in their general dislike of group learning stories which describe a collective experience, such as centre excursion. An interesting area for both groups

emerged as they referenced an awareness of specific 'have to's' or 'must do's' linked to their perceptions of learning story 'requirements' from external authority level stakeholders. This was well captured by one teacher who, when asked about the curriculum links in her learning story, stated, "I just do it because I know that's what I *have to add in there*".

4.3. Unpacking teachers and parents' views about learning stories

While information in Table 4 provides an overview of the main topics discussed and how frequently these were mentioned by teachers and parents, frequency of mention might not be a direct reflection of their importance. The following sections examine the key areas that were highlighted by teachers, parents, or both, as important for a quality learning story. Themes are presented first from the teacher perspective and then the parent perspective. In some areas, there is a clear congruence between perspectives, while in others there is a tension or group-specific perspective.

4.3.1. Making learning links visible and the role of curriculum

For teachers a top quality marker in their perspective of learning stories was making learning visible within the learning stories. When asked to describe a quality learning story, one teacher responded, "*a story of children's learning, that child's learning. It's not a story, it is a learning story, with a focus on learning, yeah, at the very core, at the heart of it*". Teachers also noted that descriptions of learning should be individualised to each child, and a lack of individualised visible learning links was a common feature of the learning stories self-selected by teachers for those that 'needed improvement'.

Notably, what teachers deemed to constitute learning included a range of different features. For example, several teachers noted that the learning links in their self-chosen high quality stories connected to wider pre-determined goals that were in place for children. One teacher noted visible learning links as:

"...things that directly link back to the goal So, if I'm thinking of a high quality one, things definitely link directly back to the goal, the ones that were well thought out, they had a clear direction, and yeah, they were, you know, good to read, they were solid, yeah not entertaining – that's a different type of quality."

Learning for other teachers related more specifically to showing curriculum links, often in a backward mapping manner. Teachers described differing ways in which they made curriculum links in learning stories with a mix of both direct quotes and paraphrasing aligned to the strands and goals in *Te Whāriki*. Several teachers noted that connections to

Te Whāriki were an expectation of their setting and two felt this was important for the Education Review Office. Teachers also highlighted the inclusion of curriculum links as needing to reflect the wider focus of their setting, suggesting a pre-determined framework guiding the creation and focus of stories within the setting. For example:

“We have a focus each term which is linked to the curriculum....our stories need to link [to this]...it needs to show that we’ve been looking at Communication and this is how you are doing Communication this term.”

A few teachers shared that they felt parents should be exposed to curriculum links alongside the description of learning highlighted. For example:

“...parents don’t want to read great big long winded stories. They don’t. And all the jargon and all this sort of thing, but I do go into the learning and refer to Te Whāriki, and I do go, you know, what learning’s happening, because it obviously is important for them to know.”

Standing in opposition to teachers’ perspectives on the positive inclusion of curriculum links were the views of parents on this theme. To this extent, most parents felt links to the curriculum within learning stories were not a positive feature of learning stories, with parents stating these were “*not important*” and “*not relevant*” to them, and subsequently “*not caring*” about this aspect. Within stories selected as ‘needing improvement’ parents often highlighted links to the curriculum as a less valued feature for them noting comments such as:

- *“...I don’t know the curriculum, I know I’m supposed to, but I don’t.”*
- *“I often skim over those bits...”*
- *“...that had a lot of curriculum quotes, yeah, that just makes it a little bit long”* [from a story selected as needing improvement].
- *“...it’s not the most interesting part of a learning story.”*
- *“...the rest [last parts of the learning story] are the boring bit I guess, sort of relating, tying into the curriculum.”*
- *“It [the story selected as needing improvement] was more focussed about the curriculum, it did have the little first part of it being about her and imaginative play, but then it sort of got lost from a third down.”*

For the few parents that made positive comments about curriculum links one was a trained teacher and one was not from New Zealand and drew specifically on this factor as the reason why she wanted to gain familiarity with the curriculum.

While curriculum links were not highly rated by the parent group there was a more mixed perspective of making learning visible within the story. About half of the parent group saw this was a positive feature of learning stories. Two of these parents however commented on their personal preference for learning to just be 'touched on', with one sharing:

"I think, maybe rather than trying to make it academic, rather than trying to analyse it you know, or kind of have to do the whole reason for why this is happening, you know I don't really need to know that because it's...actually the capturing of that moment and experience to me which is most important..."

For parents who felt that making the learning visible was important, a lack of visible learning links contributed to their selection of learning stories that needed improvement. In one instance, a parent selected a learning story that needed improvement due to the lack of learning links within the story. This same learning story was later highlighted by the teacher in this setting as an example of a high quality story, in-part due to her perception of strong learning links. Examples such as this highlighted the distance, at times, between the perspectives of teachers and parents, and even a disparate understanding of what learning can look like.

4.3.2. Presentation, style and structure

Style and presentation was highly topical for the both teacher and parent participants. Teachers directly associated good presentation with high quality learning stories and placed value on this feature. 'Good' presentation was seen to be inclusive of personalised photographs, catchy titles, suitable layout with text broken up and dispersed between photographs, suitable font and font size, borders, and colour. Several teachers felt the presentation of a learning story held a role in the way it would 'capture' parents or children to read, or re-visit, a story. For example,

"...you want to have something that's going to catch the eye and entice, especially the children, but entice the parents into actually wanting to read it."

"[a quality story is] ...engaging and capturing them, and I think it makes it's easier for not just the children to read, but also for less educated people, like dad's, they can have a bit more of an involvement and excitement...It's inviting you in, so I think it needs to have photos of the children, needs to have photos of the individual child, and it does need to be colourful."

Some teachers noted potential barriers to their expectations for presentation, particularly in relation to the inclusion of colour, for example settings that had set limits on colour printing due to financial constraints.

For the parent group the visual presentation of learning stories was also seen as influential in determining whether a learning story was subsequently deemed to be 'good' or not. As for teachers, parents associated high quality learning stories with visually attractive pages, catchy story titles, and colourful presentation. In one instance, a parent selected a story that 'needed improvement' because of its visual presentation stating, *"it's just not as eye catching"*.

For most of the parent group the use of personalised photographs was highlighted as a key quality feature for stories. Photographs were noted by parents to serve several purposes, such as:

- providing a visual element to enhance the narrative or support readers to envision this;
- validating or evidencing the event / learning described;
- supporting parents to feel part of the experience and not 'miss out' on what goes on;
- attracting or enticing parents, family members, and children to read or re-visit stories.

The central nature of photographs to good learning stories from the perspective of parents was highlighted in comments such as *"the photographs are very important; it makes you feel part of their day"*, *"... without a picture I don't think it makes sense"* and *"it's all very well having words there but actually seeing it, it gives more of a bigger picture."*

For one parent, photographs were also seen to add *"context, relationships, and remembering who's who"*. One further parent highlighted the lasting visual memory photographs provided for her, stating *"...you kind of keep that picture in your mind forever, and that's why it's really important to me"*. The types of photographs, and the number of these, was also important for some parents. One parent, for example, shared, *"you can definitely have too many pictures in them – in the likes of group stories"*, whilst several other parents noted that it was the personalised nature of the photographs to their child that enhanced their opinion of a learning story and increased the value of this for them.

In addition to the visual components of learning stories that were emphasised by teachers and parents, the style and structure of stories was also noted, though to a lesser degree. Structurally, for some of the teacher participants it was their understanding of the 'Notice-Recognise-Respond' model and their embedding of these elements within stories that was a contributing feature towards their selection of a good story. No parents directly made links to the overall 'Notice-Recognise-Respond' structure used by some teachers, however one parent did comment on the inclusion of 'next steps' within the 'respond'

section as a feature she liked in the learning story she selected as high quality. For a few parents it was stories that were written from the first-person perspective and addressed to individual children that were that were seen as characteristic of good stories. The length of stories, although not widely commented on by teachers, was also recognised as a feature that held importance to some parents. For parents a preference for short paragraphs of text, visual features, and stories no longer than one page in length was noted. Overall most parents connected style and structure together and indicated a preference for stories that were *“simple, easy and fluid to read”*. One parent, for example, commented:

“A page is quite nice – it covers the event nicely – it covers a touch of their reactions and it is enough to cover a touch of the learning. It seems a good structure.”

Examples here highlight commonly valued features of learning stories between teachers and parents, particularly in terms of presentation and the use of individual photographs, as well as more distinct features unique to each group, such as parental preference for short story length.

4.3.3. Connection to a cycle of learning and next steps

For all of the teachers interviewed, a key feature of their personally selected ‘good’ learning stories was continuity over time, clearly capturing a cycle of learning across multiple occasions. Diversity in the way in which learning over time was documented in practice was however notable during interviews. For example, some teachers considered ‘next steps’ as documentation at the end of a learning story and placed importance on this directly connecting to a further documented story. Other teachers did not directly document ‘next steps’ in this way but did place emphasis on the overall continuity and connection of stories in terms of learning themes. For example, some teachers highlighted a chain of stories connected to the curriculum strand of Communication or Exploration for children over time. In contrast, no parents highlighted the continuity of themes and / or visibility of learning over time as being a key quality feature of learning stories.

4.3.4. Personally meaningful stories for the child

All teacher participants voiced a strong connection between stories that were personally meaningful for children and high quality learning stories. For teachers these high quality, personally meaningful stories were seen to showcase events and experiences that captured child-centred learning. It is also of note that personally meaningful stories were viewed by all teachers as individualised stories, with teachers highlighting the ‘knowing relationships’ that underpinned these stories. For example:

“I think it [a good learning story] needs to be meaningful. I mean, you can write a story about you know, oh we went to the park and you found three rocks. Cool. But if

you delve into why they picked those three particular rocks, or what it was that drew them to that, then I think, yeah! I would love the kids to look back when they're 16, 20, however old, and go, oh yeah, the teachers really knew me....".

"It's about really understanding your children. It's about relationships and knowing your children.... using those kind of dispositions that are really true to the children."

For some teacher participants personally meaningful stories were also aligned with 'meaningful learning'. For example:

"You should be able to pick up a profile book and you should get a really good feel for that child, and you should be able to understand that child and where they're at.... Sometimes I just think, oh, what's that for? Where's the meaningful learning...they need to be meaningful, so ask yourself why you're writing that story."

Meaningful stories were also understood by most teachers to reflect the unique interests of children. Highlighting this perspective was one teacher's comment that a good learning story *"should reflect what they love being and doing at that point in time, you know, yeah, what they really want to invest in and engage in"*.

The weighting placed by teacher participants on individualised, personally meaningful stories, was further reflected in the stories selected for needing improvement. Typically, these stories were collective group learning stories, written about a centre event.

Teachers also noted that a lack of sustained relationship and subsequent superficial knowledge of specific children led to such stories. For example, several teachers identified children who were enrolled for only a short time in settings each week as more likely to have collective stories. Some teachers noted the inauthentic nature of the stories that they had written in such cases. For example, in discussing a story that needed improvement one teacher commented:

"This little girl, she hasn't been here much, so I remember seeing her doing this [the theme of the learning story] with the teacher. They were measuring some stuff. But, to be honest, I didn't know the full extent of what's happening so I probably kind of fabricated a little bit of the story...but I guess I had to, not make it up, but I had to sort of adlib a bit, you know, and sometimes, and I do admit that sometimes I do, you know, I have to kind of make-up little bits of things."

Parent participants mirrored a similar emphasis on stories that held personal meaning to their child, being individualised and tailored. For parents, personally meaningful stories largely meant stories that focused only on their child, and highlighted or conveyed a

personal knowingness of the child from the writer. This notion is highlighted in several parent comments:

“My favourite story is this one here.... I really liked it...it’s all about her and I really appreciated that, so that’s my favourite story.”

“A good learning story is when, I mean I know you’re supposed to write about how it relates to the focus of the day care, but I find it’s more when it’s about them [the child], than trying to make it relate to the things it’s supposed to.”

“...it needs to be real.... I think as a parent I’m like, no, that’s not my child, because words and stuff they’ve said he uses, and I’m like no, it needs to be real.... I know what he is interested in. Like there’s one about gardening, and I know with gardening he loves it, but then I was reading it and I was like, I know he knows this because like it was how do carrots grow and we’ve been growing them at home for a couple of years....”

The positioning and valuing of individualised learning stories as a commonly valued feature shared between participant groups was a clear discovery highlighted by the data collected.

4.3.5. Connection for parent or teacher

The way in which learning stories connect personally with writers of the stories, as well as with the intended audience, was given voice by teacher participants. All teachers emphasised that a good learning story was one that was crafted with awareness of wider connections. For teachers, these planned connections were seen to include:

- Family aspirations
- Family connections
- Family cultural practices and beliefs
- Teacher’s personal interests
- Children’s individual goals

From this list, different teachers highlighted different connections of importance, for example not all teachers noted that a good learning story should connect with parent aspirations.

A good learning story, from several parents’ perspectives, was directly linked to a personal connection the story had for them. Several parents noted that the sharing of their own aspirations for their child (verbally or written) and the responsiveness of teachers to then connect this information into learning stories was highly valued. In this sense, for

most parents, the personal connection that they had to stories was linked to aspirations they had expressed and shared for their child. For example:

“My favourite story is.... about bubbly Miss [child’s name] because what has been happening is her bestest friend in the whole wide world ever moved away, and so we’ve been really having trouble with her connecting with a new friend, and this story was about getting her bubblyness back again....I really appreciated that, so that’s my favourite story.”

“...so we have lots of different languages...and I want her to learn so that she can communicate with my family. And, coming, bringing her to preschool, I write the words what I’ve been teaching her at home, so she can continue. So the teachers acknowledge that...they actually put the words somewhere.... now that’s a really good learning story. And they do write in the book, [child’s name] has been saying this or that....so it’s really good learning...”

Conversely, one parent highlighted the perceived lack of intentional connection to her shared aspirations in discussing the story she felt could be improved. When asked whether she felt the goals and aspirations she had written into her child’s profile book were reflected in the story shared she replied:

“No.....I guess in sort of a subtle way, but in terms of actually saying, yeah, oh you know, we read your goals and aspiration, and this is what we’ve noticed...no that hasn’t, that doesn’t happen, no”.

For a few parent participants their personal connection with stories was linked to a connection with wider family interests in an unintentional way, unplanned by a teacher. For example, one parent’s favourite story was about her daughter’s enjoyment of art and this parent was able to draw a family connection from this sharing, *“it’s the sort of thing that both me and my partner were into as kids, like that’s sort of passed onto her in a way...and that was just like, oh, we’ve got another one”.*

Examples here highlight the significance of connections, personal and aspirational within learning stories for both participant groups, in particular for parent participants.

4.3.6. Different types of stories with a variety of purposes

The variety of learning story styles and types was a common theme acknowledged by all teachers, as well as noting that different types of learning stories often served differing purposes. Teachers noted that different types might include purposeful focus on:

- intentional teaching and learning linked to goals

- events
- ‘snippets’
- group and individual stories
- milestones

Several teachers selected group learning stories as those that needed improvement and highlighted challenges with ways in which they felt they could personalise or acknowledge individual learning within these. One teacher said that she felt there was “*no academic substance*” to group learning stories saying, “*this is literally just a this is what we did, here are a bunch of fun photos of your kids having a great time, and yeah, so from my perspective, like as far as academic-wise this is....[pause]..... but from a parent’s point of view, as long as I can see my child in one of these, or at least a couple of photos I’d be happy*”. One teacher labelled group stories as “*little snippets*” further saying, “*they’ve got learning but it’s not really, like there’s nothing to go to next*”.

In further considering different types of learning stories, several teachers defined some of these as ‘filler stories’. These stories were described as those written quickly, often to fill a cyclic quota of stories that needed to be completed, and often linked to a lack of time. As one teacher stated, “*there is no time, but it’s definitely how it is. It’s like, oh I need something for this child because they haven’t had any [learning stories] for a while*”. One teacher noted her ‘filler stories’ as her ‘template stories’. Whilst some teachers saw ‘filler stories’ as stories that needed improvement, all offered insight into approaches they felt they could take if they were to re-do these stories. For example:

“...I could have gone into what exact learning was happening, and maybe expanded, you know. Then we could have looked at where we can go from here...”

“...it could put more focus on, you know, the process that [child’s name] went through, and I guess it could have been done through photos.”

In a similar manner to the teachers, most of the parent participants also noted that there were different types of learning stories shared with them in their child’s portfolios. Like the teachers, parents categorised the type and purpose of these stories to also include events and outings, snippets, and milestones. However, unique to the parent participants was the further categorisation of:

- ‘wow’ moments
- ‘little moments’
- ‘magical moments’
- a snapshot of learning or ‘what happens in a day’.

Different parents placed value on different types of stories with some parents selecting high quality stories that captured “*wow moments*” or “*something out of the ordinary*”, whilst others valued stories that focused on a general snapshot of daily life and “*what they’ve been up to*”.

Whilst there was not a clear pattern of preference associated here with what type of focus makes a good learning story, there was a collective parental valuing of individual stories and more disregard voiced for group learning stories. Half of the parents interviewed selected a group learning story as the story that ‘needed improvement’. For these parents, group learning stories were not personalised or specific to their child and parents found them not “*helpful*” or “*useful*”. Some parents described ‘filler stories’ as “*rushed*”. As one parent noted, “*I just didn’t think it was centred on [daughter’s name] - it was more of a general thing that you would see possibly on a news board*”.

An awareness of the variety of learning story types and purposes was clearly highlighted by both participant groups with an overall shared valuing of personalised stories, while group learning stories were less preferred due to the limited sense of connection.

4.3.7. Differing voices and multiple perspectives

The inclusion of ‘child’s voice’ within learning stories was a feature that many teachers placed high value on and attributed to good learning stories. When asked what this feature contributes to learning stories, most teachers saw this as supporting more personally meaningful stories for the child through capturing the authentic child’s perspective. The inclusion of child’s voice was also viewed by a few teachers to ‘back up’ what was being written about. A few teachers also emphasised the differing perspective the inclusion of child’s voice could contribute to a story. For example, one teacher stated, “*...their [a child’s] idea of something is often completely different to ours and sometimes their knowledge is more*”.

In a similar manner, most teachers articulated a personal valuing of the inclusion of ‘parent voice’ within learning stories. However, while the child’s voice was present in most of the ‘good’ stories selected by teachers, the majority of these ‘good’ stories documented no evident parent voice. During interviews it was noted that teachers spoke in-depth about their genuine desire to include ‘parent voice’ but reported frequent experiences of profile books being returned without any comments added. To address this issue, teachers saw informal conversations with parents as the most successful way in which they could gain feedback from parents. When asked whether snippets from informal conversations were

later scribed back into learning stories, most teachers thought this would be of value however none had yet to add this to their practice. One teacher did not place emphasis on the inclusion of parent voice stating, *“I probably should have a parent bit but I can never, I'm quite wordy and I can never cram everything in”*.

For the parent participant group, the inclusion of ‘child’s voice’ in a learning story was identified as a valued feature though to a lesser extent than for teachers. Only a few parents noted this as a feature that contributed to a good learning story, but those that did recognised the role that the child’s voice played in crafting a personally meaningful story noting this as *“awesome”* and *“amazing”*, and capturing the *“excitement”* of the event. The lack of the inclusion of child’s voice was also a key element for one parent in her selection of the learning story that needed improvement noting that *“it’s not really got any of his language”*. One further parent also commented on the need for the inclusion of a child’s voice to be authentic in order for there to be quality noting that *“you kind of [need to] make sure you’re getting the right language for the child if you’re putting language in there, because as a parent it’s like quite obvious that it’s not, yeah, your child”*.

Whilst the teacher participants placed value on capturing parent voice, albeit often unsuccessful in seeing this translate into learning story documentation, the majority of parents did not associate a good learning story with the inclusion of their own voice and most of the high quality ‘good’ stories selected by parents did not include parent voice, or any other perspective on the documented learning. Of this group, one parent was not aware that they could contribute despite the learning story in discussion including a parent voice box with a stated question. Other parents predominantly noted time as the largest barrier for not commenting in writing, as represented in this parent statement, *“I keep meaning to comment and write back but then, my life has just taken over, you know busyness and working...”*. Other parents noted their preference to connect through conversation with teachers - *“I always come in here and say what X’s been up to at home or share little bits and pieces. Whenever I get a chance I just have a yarn to the teachers of things she’s been doing at home”*. No parents commented on the inclusion of wider perspectives on the learning documented as a feature of note. From the perspective of parents, the inclusion of the child’s voice was seen as a feature contributing to the personalisation of a story.

4.3.8. Holistic, strengths-based image of child

During interviews with teacher participants no members of this group specifically drew on the terminology ‘strengths-based’ or ‘holistic’, central to the deductive codes used during

data analysis, when discussing their high quality good learning story. Both features were however evident and visible in the stories shared with the researcher and, when prompted, several teachers highlighted “positive learning” as a key feature underpinning a good learning story, as well as stories that acknowledged and built on children’s unique interests and areas of inquiry. While all parent participants highlighted their enjoyment of their selected ‘good’ stories and the ‘positive nature’ of stories shared, only a few parents specifically noted the strengths-based approach and the capturing of the holistic image of a child as key features of a good story. For example, one parent, when asked what features support a good learning story, replied, *“the children’s strengths and what they’re learning”*.

4.3.9. Informal sharing of stories

When considering ways in which learning stories were shared with children and their families some teachers described that having hard copy profile books both visible and accessible as the most common way to facilitate sharing. Most teachers also observed that ‘good’ learning stories were also the ‘popular stories’ that were largely re-visited by children on a regular basis. These ‘popular stories’ for children were largely individualised, focused on meaningful learning, often connected with peers, and were presented as colourful pages with personalised photographs. For all parent participants a clear valuing of children’s portfolios was evident during interviews with parents noting their enjoyment of informally sharing stories with immediate family members and/or their own child, and even beyond to the wider family. The enjoyment gained from sharing learning stories and re-visiting learning and experiences was noted in the following two parent comments:

“...whenever we bring it home we always share it with, yeah, whoever’s come over, aunties and grandparents and what not.”

“Yeah, I share this book with my mum and sister, and obviously [child’s name] dad. Yeah, definitely, I constantly bring the profile book around to mum’s house, and she loves it...”

The sharing of the stories selected by parents as high quality was given particular emphasis when parents considered ways in which they informally share stories with others. As one parent stated, *“I’ve shown some of my family because it is a really cool story”*. These examples particularly highlight the enjoyment and interest gained from differing audiences when good learning stories are made available to them. Despite, however, the enjoyment and valuing of children’s portfolios by parent participants, this did not impact on increasing documented parental contributions, as noted earlier in this section.

4.3.10. Perceived 'have to's' and 'must do's'

Interview data revealed that many teachers associated learning stories with accountability, including the range of external guidelines that they saw their learning stories as needing to align with. When discussing their practices, teachers frequently used the terminology of 'I have to.....', or 'we must do.....', highlighting overarching requirements that they felt dictated the type, frequency, or style of learning story they wrote. This perception was linked to a range of contributing elements such as:

- guidelines from the setting
- the centre theme
- parent aspirations
- individual goals
- outside accountability agencies such as the Education Review Office
- centre checklists
- training or PLD undertaken on learning stories
- quotas or rosters for when stories are written, for which children, and what type of story (i.e. individual or group).

Alignment, or adherence to, such accountability elements was a recurring theme for several teachers and highlighted the challenge in writing a 'good' personally meaningful story whilst also meeting external conditions and measures of success. Many parents articulated an awareness and understanding that there were guidelines teachers needed to 'comply' with when writing their learning stories and an understanding that stories were written for an audience wider than their child and their family. Several parent comments reflected assumptions on why learning stories included curriculum and learning links, and why group stories may be written. For example:

"I think that's what they've been told to do now, is to tie a lot of curriculum into it and always relate back to, yeah, what it means for the child's learning".

"Yeah, I appreciate what the teachers are doing, and I understand it's what they have to do"

"I guess if it did have to refer to the curriculum for the teachers' assessments or whatever, they could just put whatever page it is at the bottom of the page so it's not a focus of the story..."

Such comments gave insight into the view of some parents that learning stories are written for a range of audiences and potential purposes and fit set requirements of some type.

4.4. Chapter Summary

Findings from the present study have identified key areas related to teacher and parent perspectives of learning stories. Within the areas described, shared and disparate views between teachers and parents occurred. The findings have led to development of five key points or insights about the use of learning stories in early childhood. These five points will be developed further in the discussion chapter and considered further in light of this study's overarching aims and research questions. These five points are briefly presented here to support a succinct synopsis of the key discoveries understood from this study's results.

Point 1: Differing and shared views of a good learning story

Several features and practices associated with good learning stories aligned for teachers and parents. Table 5 (p. 56) displays the practices and features of learning stories valued by parents and teachers and the eight key crossover areas that align with each other, as well as the areas that were viewed as important by one group but not the other.

Point 2: The things not said

It is of note that no teachers explicitly talked about the potential role of formative or summative assessment in their highlighting of learning links, and no teachers singled out or mentioned the word 'assessment' throughout their interviews when discussing high quality learning stories. Although teachers placed importance on a cycle of learning, learning stories were largely presented in a summative manner with the way in which teachers used learning stories formatively to inform teaching and learning being unclear. In this sense, a cycle of learning was often focused on a curriculum strand. One teacher noted that the key purpose of a learning story was to "document learning", seemingly and implicitly highlighting the summative approach that appeared to be taken by many teachers. In a similar manner, when asked to consider a definition of learning stories parents largely viewed these as "progress reports".

Table 5.

Alignment of features and practices associated with good learning stories:

Parent-teacher perspectives

Parent perspective	<i>Parent-teacher aligned perspectives</i>	Teacher perspective
Features and processes valued in learning stories		
Personally meaningful stories to the child	<i>Personally meaningful stories to the child</i>	Personally meaningful stories to the child
Well presented, colourful, catchy title	<i>Well presented, colourful, catchy title</i>	Well presented, colourful, catchy title, borders
Individual, meaningful photos	<i>Personalised photographs that contribute meaning</i>	Individualised photos highlighting learning in action
Individual focused stories	<i>Individual focused stories</i>	Individual focused stories
Opportunities to share informally with children and other family members	<i>Informal sharing of stories</i>	Informal opportunities to share, accessible portfolios
Incorporation of child's voice	<i>Child's voice</i>	Incorporation of child's voice
No longer than one page, short segments of text, easy to read, inclusion of photographs	<i>Short segments of clear text and thoughtful use of photographs</i>	Font size and font type, suitable layout with text and photographs
Connected to parent aspirations and / or family cultural beliefs / practices	<i>Purposeful connection to parent aspirations</i>	Connected to parent aspirations, family connections, family cultural practices and beliefs, teachers personal interests, centre theme or individual goals
Brief learning links*		Learning made visible*
		Connected to a cycle of learning
		Connected to children's interests
		Linked to the curriculum
		Parent voice**

* Though these features may appear connected they are diametrically opposed as discussed in this chapter.

** This feature was aspired to by teachers and considered central to a good learning story however it was not evidenced in the exemplars provided.

Point 3: Individual stories trump the group and filler stories; yet teachers continue to write them

Findings affirm that both parents and teachers give preference to individualised learning stories with personalised and meaningful connection being made with each child and their family. Group learning stories were not appreciated by teachers or parents in terms of quality or value. The concept of 'filler learning stories' was identified by both teachers and parents. Such stories were often associated with group learning stories, and were perceived as rushed, often inauthentic, and not personalised. For teachers, 'filler stories' were often linked to time constraints and the need to meet an external quota of stories per month. In this sense, quality and quantity were often evidentially disparate.

Point 4: Meeting the needs and expectations of third party audiences

The desire from teachers to write learning stories that are personalised and meaningful for individual children and their families often appeared compromised by an overarching perception of 'must do's and must have's'. In this sense, it appeared as though learning stories may serve to tick or evidence many diverse boxes within settings, ultimately compromising some features of this assessment approach.

Point 5: Time for teachers and parents to talk to each other about assessment

It was evident during interviews that most teachers and parents had strong respectful relationships in place and that opportunities for informal conversations were proactively sought during drop-off and pick-up times on a regular basis. Despite the foundation of what appeared to be good family-centred relationships, it was of interest that no teachers had informally asked parents what they liked and valued in the way teachers wrote learning stories. From the teacher perspective there appeared to be a lot of 'wondering' about what parents thought and valued but no shared conversation initiated.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Introduction

What makes a great learning story? This study set out to explore the features and practices of learning stories that were personally valued by teachers and parents within two early childhood education settings. Aiming to build on current discourse, a central aim of this study was to consider the potential similarities and / or differences that may present between teacher and parent perspectives. Three questions guided this investigation:

1. What are teachers' perspectives of the key quality features and practices in learning stories?
2. What are parents' perspectives of the key quality features and practices in learning stories?
3. What is the alignment between teacher and parent perspectives?

The answers to these questions are examined in the following discussion.

The findings of the study revealed that while teachers and parents collectively placed value on eight shared processes and features of learning stories several other key features had disparate and, at times, polarising views. In this chapter the overall discussion will be aligned to the five key points identified from the analysis of data and considered in light of this study's research questions. The first key point explores the main aspects of the differing and shared views of a good learning story held by teachers and parents and considers the complexity of these findings. Given the central nature of this point to this study's research questions, this area is afforded more discussion than the remaining four points of interest. The second key point discusses aspects that were identified as notably absent or 'less spoken of' by teachers and parents, yet are often considered hallmark features of this assessment approach in wider literature or identified in past research. The third key point considers the collective value teachers and parents placed on individually focused stories for children and the impact of this in the positioning and valuing of group learning stories. The fourth key point explores teacher and parent awareness that learning stories are written for multiple audiences and considers the impact of this on personalised and meaningful learning stories. The final key point reflects upon the ongoing opportunity teachers have to engage in shared communication with parents to better understand what they value in learning stories. In this chapter, key implications emerging from the findings are highlighted, the strengths and limitations of

the present study are discussed and possible future directions for research identified. The conclusion of this study will be integrated at the end of this chapter in a summary statement that draws together the key findings and notes the overall contribution of the research to the sector.

5.2. Differing and shared views of a good learning story

The non-prescriptive nature of the learning story framework requires that teachers take an active role in considering and deciding what should be the focus of a learning story and how to document and share this with others (Niles, 2016). Given this backdrop, it is not surprising that learning stories today are recognised for their diversity and variety in terms of form, focus, style and content (ERO, 2007, 2016; McLaughlin et al., 2016). Furthermore, given the subjective nature of this assessment approach, that different features and practices within learning stories will attract and hold appeal to different audiences. The findings of this study identified several key features and practices of learning stories that were given shared value by teachers and parents when identifying the features that characterise a good learning story.

Shared features of learning stories perceived as 'good' included ensuring learning stories were well-presented and structured, including visual appeal and personalised photographs that contributed to meaning and thoughtful use of short text. Moreover, learning stories valued by both parents and teachers were personally meaningful and individual in nature, reflective of the individual child and inclusive of their voice. Opportunities to informally share stories and to align connections to shared parental aspirations were also identified as important. Whilst these key areas crossed over for both teachers and parents in a shared nature, findings noted that for parents a good learning story contained only brief learning links whereas for teachers learning and curriculum links needed to be detailed, visible, and robust. Teachers in the study also placed value on stories that were connected to a wider cycle of learning and to children's interests, as well as those that aspired to contain parent voice. These latter features and practices were not emphasised by parents as important for a good story. Findings in this study therefore showed both common alignment and specific differences when teachers and parents considered valued features and practices of learning stories, revealing elements of both consensus and divergence. These elements will be further discussed below and considered in light of the literature in this area.

5.2.1. Visual attraction and shared constructs of ‘good’ pedagogical documentation

Documentation is recognised as a unique feature of learning stories that holds value to teachers, children and their families (Carr & Lee, 2012; Zhang, 2017). How a learning story is presented held personal value to teachers and parents in terms of perceived quality. The findings from this study offer an insight into the consensus found between these two groups with regards to specific elements. Teacher and parents were united in their promotion of good stories that were colourful in display, well presented with short segments of text interspersed between or amongst meaningful photographs, and those that had a catchy story title, often integrating the name of the child, that worked to capture the attention of the reader. Easy to read text, using a clear font, and stories no longer than a page were further defining elements voiced by both groups. The inclusion of photographs was recognised by both groups to not only increase the visual appeal of learning stories, but to also serve a range of key purposes such as enabling the documented learning to be made visible and supporting the narrative telling of the story. Findings from this study resonate with those noted by Pennells (2017) and Mitchell’s NZCER national survey (2008), particularly in terms of the value placed on personalised photographs. Mitchell (2008) notes that photographs were seen by teachers and parents as valuable as they “are able to be ‘read’ by a range of audiences, children, and adults, and in their emotional appeal” (p. viii). In this sense, well-chosen photographs are seen as a connecting medium to engage parents and families with effect to children’s experiences. Such engagement also holds the secondary benefit of strengthening parent and family relationships with settings (Pennells, 2017).

An interesting finding from Zhang (2017), standing in contrast to this study’s finding, was a parental voiced ‘limitation’ to learning stories linking ‘pretty’ documentation with concern about unsubstantial informative story content. An illustration from Zhang’s (2017) study noted one parent to say, “...I know what my child looks like....I don’t need to see her with firemen, I kind of know what she looks like, but I don’t know what’s going on in her brain, you know?” (p. 261). Mitchell and Furness (2015), when considering outcomes of collaboration in terms of assessment, however aptly note that “families have different informational needs” (p. 8) and the exchange of learning documentation needs to be built on strong partnerships with parents and families. In light of the findings from the current study, it would seem that a good story needs to be presented well, with the inclusion of photographs, but also to contain personal meaning and quality information that matches individual family expectations in order to be considered ‘good’. In this sense, a good story needs to be a good familial fit.

When considering the tools and resources required to produce a well presented good learning story, access to suitable technology (camera, colour printer, etc), skills to use these tools, the impact of online portfolio formats, and adequate time are all identified in literature as pivotal (Boardman, 2007; Cameron et al., 2016; Hooker, 2016; Loggenberg, 2011; Mawson, 2011; Mitchell, 2008; Nyland & Alfayez, 2012). Teachers in this study echoed the importance of such tools and resources, particularly emphasising the element of time. Tension can then arise when these aspects are compromised and valued features of presentation and documentation are not realised to the quality level desired by teachers and parents. Unrealistic quotas, inadequate non-contact time, competing administrative demands, and unsatisfactory access to ICT tools are recognised barriers to the consistent attainment of well-presented learning stories (Niles, 2016). As such, an unresolved issue remains present between the aspired and desired practice from teachers and parents and the right 'environmental fit' for enabling high quality documentation and well-presented learning stories to be created. Given that presentation and quality documentation were rated so highly by both groups, these barriers require ongoing dialogue. Findings might therefore support the use of online platforms/ e-portfolios for the creation and sharing of learning stories in addressing some of the noted issues.

5.2.2. Personalised and meaningful stories

A key tenet of the learning story approach is a focus on noticing, recognising, and responding to individual learning through a personalised model of assessment rather than a standardised approach (Carr, 2001; Nyland & Alfayez, 2012). Teachers and parents in this study shared a common appreciation for learning stories that were considered personally meaningful to children. These stories were seen as individual in nature and provided authentic and meaningful information about children while celebrating their unique journeys of discovery and learning. Stories were considered personalised and meaningful when they included children's voices, acknowledged children's interests and linked to the aspirations parents held for their children. Such features resonate well with the current direction given in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) that asserts that assessment should make "valued learning visible" (p. 63). These understandings support earlier findings by McLaughlin et al. (2016) who found that the teachers interviewed in their study placed value on stories that highlighted significant events for the child and those that showed the identity and image of the child as a learner. Personally meaningful learning stories that were valued from the perspective of parents and teachers in this study were not however overtly associated with depth or contextual detail which is different from the voices of some teachers captured in earlier studies (Pennells, 2017; Zhang, 2017).

5.2.3. Opportunities to informally share

Findings from this study suggest that teachers typically use informal approaches in sharing learning stories with parents, usually in the conversation that occurs at the beginning and end of days, or through the portfolios. Carr and Lee (2012) view documented assessment that is shared as a powerful tool for building partnerships with parents and strengthening children's learner identities. Both of these facets were referenced by teachers and parents in this study as positive outcomes that had occurred through the informal sharing of learning stories. It is noted in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) that portfolios are a good way for assessment to be shared with parents and that they also "provide opportunities for parents and whānau to engage with their child's learning journey and contribute their own observations and suggestions" (p. 63). Both of the settings in this study collated their learning stories into hard-copy portfolios and informally exchanged these with parents and children on a regular basis. Whilst there was a clear enjoyment and valuing of the portfolios by both parents and children, the practice of informal sharing did not often result in eliciting contributions from parents in adding their voice to individual learning stories, even when given space to do so. Contributions from parents is a desired practice that is central to the original intention of the learning stories approach (Hatherly & Sands, 2002) and also a recognised feature of successful home-school partnerships (Bull, Brooking, & Campbell, 2008). An implication of these findings therefore suggests that effective ways of sharing and exchanging assessment information with parents needs ongoing consideration. Further discussion on parent contribution and voice occurs later in this chapter and explores potential barriers in sharing meaningful outcomes across contexts.

5.2.4. Curriculum and learning links

Assessment for learning is described in *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004) as *noticing, recognising, and responding*, with learning remaining at the forefront of the narrative assessment approach. Teachers in this study were clear on the value associated with the inclusion of explicit links to learning and curriculum in learning stories. For teachers, this component seemed almost a given assumption and a core identifying feature of learning stories. Learning was broadly considered by teachers to consist of links to individual goals, developmental achievements, setting themes or events, curriculum connections, and specific strand outcomes from *Te Whariki*. In contrast, parents valued stories that showed 'wow moments' for their child in terms of important events or accomplishments, or 'snippets' of their daily experiences, without specific breakdowns of the learning. What is apparent from these findings is the different priorities for learning recognition in the content of learning stories. Such findings perhaps also suggest that

further support may be needed for teachers and parents to develop a shared understanding of what learning through play and valued learning highlighted within *Te Whāriki* looks like. Learning links were also noted by McLaughlin et al. (2016) as a feature valued by teachers and considered central to good stories. Similar to findings from the current study, these researchers also noted learning links were diverse in nature and extended beyond recognition of dispositional learning. This affirms that a variety of lenses are employed today to view learning and that learning stories are utilised in different ways to document significant events and learning. This finding links with earlier findings by the Education Review Office (2007) which also observed wide variety in content and noted that not all stories identified learning. Findings suggest that teachers may need support in finding ways to make learning visible in these assessments, that serve curriculum and teaching needs, as well as supporting families growing understanding of learning in early childhood education.

Teachers from both settings made mention of specific processes that guided their assessment documentation and practice, such as setting-specific ‘checklists’ that outlined the ‘requirements’ of what needed to be included in learning story documentation. Such checklists were often underpinned by valued learning story practices promoted by the Education Review Office, such as ensuring clear and evidential learning links to curriculum outcomes. It is of interest that whilst teachers were encouraged to include curriculum and learning links, this was not a priority for parents even to the degree of the “curriculum and learning bit” being so off-putting that some parents actively stopped reading at this point. The polarising views of parents compared to teachers is of clear interest raising the question of what it is here that makes the story unravel, or even stop, for some parents at this point? Some parents offered insight into this question when they shared comments that these parts were “too technical”, and that they “didn’t make sense”, alongside other parents who said that they weren’t that familiar with the curriculum and could not connect to what these parts were about. These insights from parents indicate that it is perhaps not a lack of interest in these parts but rather the unfamiliar nature of them that that creates a barrier of understanding for parents.

5.2.5. Noticeably connected stories

Assessment in early childhood education is understood as formative with core elements encompassing “identifying the learning, progress to date, possible next steps, and whether additional support is required” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 64). Portfolios are recognised in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) as a “useful way for kaiako to follow children’s progress and interests” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 63). This direction

mirrors the exemplars in *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2007a, 2007b, 2009a, 2009b) which places emphasis on assessment within a wider planning cycle. Assessment information that shows continuity between learning at home and at the centre and captures progress over time (ERO, 2013a, 2013b) is also a priority. It was therefore not surprising that the teachers in this study recognised good stories as those that were connected to a wider cycle of planning. This finding mirrored the emphasis that teachers placed on connection and continuity over time in the teacher interviews undertaken by McLaughlin et al. (2016). It is interesting to note however that what this connection and continuity looked like in practice for teachers in this study was highly variable in nature and was often hard for teachers to describe or evidence - a feature also recognised through the findings of studies such as Mitchell (2008) and Niles (2016). *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 63) contends that formative assessment “leads directly to changes in the teaching and learning environment that will help children reach immediate and longer-term goals”. This statement highlights the expectation for connection between assessment and on-going planning. Lee and Carr (2012) use the term ‘chains of learning episodes’ when highlighting the “dispositional and disciplinary (subject-based) elements [that] a portfolio will trace” (p. 109), a definition that works well when considering the variable approaches to connection and continuity that were illustrated in this study. Despite the direction given in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) to utilise a variety of assessment approaches, learning stories were the main way teachers in these settings approached assessment. Given the current predominance of learning stories in the sector, wider dialogue and support that targeted effective ways to use the learning story approach to evidence children’s learning over time would be beneficial. This is particularly significant given that the draft *Early Learning Strategic Plan* released in 2018 highlights the need for child progress tools, and more evidence of the way in which children are working towards the learning outcomes of *Te Whāriki*.

5.2.6. Parent voice

Te Whāriki notes that when assessment is shared with parents it is useful for “informing...families.....about children’s learning and progress over time” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 63). The curriculum however also notes that the sharing of assessment information and portfolios should move beyond simply ‘informing’ parents and should provide opportunities for parents to “engage with their child’s learning journey and contribute their own observations and suggestions” (p. 63). As such, it is the expectation of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) that parents and families will have an active role within the assessment process. *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2007a, 2007b, 2009a, 2009b) emphasises and illustrates the many valued ways parents and

families can participate in this process (Mitchell, 2008) however the Education Review Office's 2007 report, *The Quality of Assessment in Early Childhood Education*, noted that the inclusion of the perspectives of parents and families in assessment documentation was an area in need of continued improvement. Teachers must find ways to break down barriers to more meaningful partnership with families in the assessment process, through affirming their contribution and looking at the means that best facilitate parent response.

The findings from this study showed that teachers desire to include parent voice in their learning stories but few were able to include this in their documentation. 'Good' stories were often written by teachers *to* parents, and largely excluded parent voice. Similar to McLaughlin et al. (2016) multiple perspectives and interpretations were also absent from learning stories selected as 'good' stories by teachers, with teachers describing the everyday and informal interactions with families as being a more common forum for the sharing and exchange of information. Teachers in the current study spoke at length about the barriers they perceived which prevented them from including parent voice. The main two barriers were time, specifically undisturbed time to talk with parents, and opportunities to access parents, with some teachers highlighting their different shifts and working hours as a barrier to being able to connect in person with parents during drop-off or pick-up times. These findings align with wider literature which has highlighted similar challenges of a persistent nature (Dalli, 2012; Pennells, 2017; Stuart et al., 2008; Whyte, 2010).

Lack of curriculum awareness (as noted above in links to learning) may also be a contributing factor in eliciting limited parental voice, such that parents might feel inhibited and less knowledgeable in contributing to assessments (Pennells, 2017). Several parents made reference to the fact they did not know the curriculum, often in a seemingly apologetic manner which implied that they perceived this as their responsibility. A few parents noted the overview of the curriculum in the front pages of their child's portfolio but several said they hadn't really read this, with one parent sharing she hadn't noticed it was there for quite some time. This poses questions such as what *do* parents know about the *Te Whāriki* curriculum framework, in what ways is the curriculum introduced to them, and in what manner is parents understanding of teaching and learning in early childhood education developed in meaningful ways? To be an equitable partner, contributing with comfort and confidence to children's assessments, it is suggested that parental participation needs to be more inclusively considered to better promote successful collaboration. In considering the parent role in assessment it has been suggested that parents are team members, consumers, informants, and advocates for their children, thus holding a complex and multifaceted role (Rutland & Hall, 2013). To be empowered to act

with agency in such pivotal roles further thought and attention is needed with respect to the way curriculum understandings are shared and communicated with parents and the avenues used to capture and value parent voice and contribution.

Whyte's (2010) study saw benefits when parents were involved in collaborating and engaging with learning stories from the initial noticing stage. Research by Hooker (2015, 2016) alongside Goodman (2013a, 2013b, 2015) suggests potential for increased parent contribution and collaboration when e-portfolios are utilised to share learning stories. An implication however of online platforms is that partnerships may become more 'digitalised' and less personalised which suggests innovative ways of gathering parent voice requires careful thought and evaluation (Hooker, 2016; Pennells, 2017). Teachers in this study also shared that communication and relational engagement with parents predominantly occurred outside of learning story focussed discussions. This mirrors the earlier findings of McLaughlin et al. (2016) and calls for action in addressing the missed opportunity for parental input into learning stories from a formative assessment perspective. Re-visiting ways in which to engage parents as active partners in this process also require careful thought towards cultural appropriateness and responsiveness when presenting new information and extending invitations to collaborate (Luafutu-Simpson, 2011). *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) captures this well when noting that "children's learning and development is enhanced when culturally appropriate ways of communicating [with families and communities] are used" (p. 20).

Recommended practice suggests that the inclusion of parent voice in a learning story should go beyond simply documenting a voice and instead work to add a different lens to understanding and interpreting learning through contextual and cultural knowledge (ERO, 2017; Pennells, 2017). Carr and Lee (2012) note the strength of the subjective nature of learning stories as a distinctive feature with different partners able to contribute meaning-making from different positions. Knauf (2018) articulates that this subjectivity is "not viewed as a disruptive factor, but as a trigger for discussions about a child's learning progress" (p. 430). Yet the importance of dialogue and a multi-lens approach to recognising children's learning in learning stories was not an emphasised feature when teachers talked about the benefit of capturing parent voice. In this regard, teachers in this study spoke more about the 'feedback' that would be harnessed from parents on stories rather than the contributing role parents could play within the formative assessment process. From the perspective of parents in this study, findings revealed a similar lack of understanding of the potential contribution they could make to the assessment process. These findings affirm Whyte (2010) and Pennells' (2017) position that parents may view

stories as complete or summative by the time it reaches them, and that they are largely unaware of the invitation to comment and input with formative influence. Certainly within this study many parents viewed learning stories as 'progress reports', already completed and shared solely for information purposes, rather than part of a collaborative act. 'Feedback' sought from the inclusion of a 'parent voice' box was therefore viewed simply as a comment on a completed story, rather than a contribution to, or different lens on assessment. Whyte (2010) has suggested that perceived notions of unequal power and the positioning of the 'teacher as expert' may further work to inhibit parental input while Pennells (2017) has highlighted motives and modes of communication (e.g. centre policies, external quality assurance bodies) as influencing factors over parents' choice to contribute, alongside a general unawareness of the curriculum. Developing a shared understanding of the contributing role of parents within the learning story process is therefore re-emphasised from findings in this study and recommended for future action.

5.2.7. Implications of differing and shared views on what makes a good learning story

It is of benefit to know what features and practices of learning stories are valued from perspectives of teachers and parents given the considerable time teachers report they invest in writing learning stories. Teachers writing learning stories without the awareness of what parents really value may miss opportunities to maximise the learning story approach to meaningfully connect, share, and jointly consider the individual learning journeys of children. Stonehouse (2012) contends that it is only through the openness to others' views, values, and perspectives and shared decision making that 'relationships' with parents truly move into 'partnerships' in support of common pursuits. It is through this lens that the findings from this study hold particular value. It is reassuring that many valued features and practices of learning stories align between teachers and parents. However, it is of concern that several key aspects were not shared and that some key understandings of assessment, and learning stories in particular, were not fully realised in practice (e.g. parent voice) or were not identified as valuable by parents as a key stakeholder group (e.g. links to curriculum). The gap between aspiration and practice, and a shared understanding of purpose, require further attention. What is given priority for documentation in learning stories, for who, why, and in what manner this is presented and shared, are all key facets that influence the effectiveness of learning stories as an approach for the assessment of young children. Given the place of learning stories as the predominant assessment approach in early childhood education the need for ongoing critique and reflection is called for in order to ensure "inclusive, robust, and insightful" practice (Cameron, 2014, p. 31). There may also be a need to consider the wider use of

multiple assessment methods to meet the various purposes for assessment and needs of different stakeholder groups (Fraser & McLaughlin, 2016).

5.3. The things not said

This study aimed to explore what key quality features and practices of learning stories teachers and parents considered important in a good story. Of particular interest were those features and practices that were not spoken about by participants, yet are presented as hallmark features of learning stories in the literature and previous studies. The absence of discussion related to these features is noteworthy in light of how teachers are translating theory to practice in this area.

Despite learning stories being in place for over two decades and being reported as the dominant form of assessment in early childhood education, no teachers referenced the word 'assessment' during their interviews. Whilst evidencing learning links and highlighting connections to learning outcomes in the curriculum were important to teachers in this study there was a notable absence of dialogue around the wider contribution of learning stories as a formative assessment tool or a direct labelling of learning stories as "assessment". This aligned with teachers' descriptions of learning stories as primarily summative in nature (i.e. noticing learning and recognising this through summative reflections linked to set curriculum learning outcomes). Whilst teachers placed value on connection and continuity within and across learning stories, the practical application of this particular construct was harder for teachers to articulate or demonstrate in the examples that they chose to share. In a similar manner, teachers did not reference or talk about the sociocultural theoretical underpinning of learning stories. It is of interest to consider whether the theoretical orientation that underpins the learning story approach is applied differently in different settings, or whether teachers have sufficient skill and knowledge in relation to this theoretical grounding. Teachers understanding of formative and socio-cultural assessment would be a pertinent line of direction for future research that would contribute wider understanding and interpretation to these particular findings.

5.4. Individual stories trump the group and filler stories; yet teachers continue to write them

Personally meaningful and individualised learning stories were described by teachers and parents as the most valued feature. In contrast, group learning stories rated much more lowly by teachers and parents, with many sharing a definitive dislike for this 'style' of story. Such findings echo Pennells' (2017) work where teachers specifically "questioned the

place of group learning stories” and conveyed feelings that these were “seen as less valuable” (p. 55). Yet, as Niles (2016) identified, group learning stories have potential to highlight children’s learning in the context of relationships with each other. It is possible therefore that the dislike of group learning stories may stem from a lack of understanding and effective skill in approaching the crafting of these. There is a difference in a story that is generic and could relate to almost any child, in comparison to a story in which a group of children are learning together. Focus and purpose are therefore important in determining whether a piece is truly an assessment of learning, and for learning, or simply documentation of an event.

Group learning stories were described by teachers in this study as ‘filler stories’, a term coined by teachers in McLaughlin et al. (2016) study. Such ‘fillers’ were seen as those that lacked in personal meaning and were quickly written often to fill an allocated quota of stories that needed to be produced each month. Filler stories were often described as stories that documented events without explicitly recognising the learning within these or considering ways in which to respond to this. The description of these stories brings to light wider consideration of *quality* stories over *quantity* in terms of learning story practice. As authors such as Mitchell (2008), Cameron et al. (2016), Loggenberg (2011), Mawson (2011), and Niles (2015, 2016) note teachers are deeply concerned about the limited time to write stories that genuinely notice, recognise and respond in personally meaningful ways. The findings of this study therefore continue to bring to the fore the tension that exists between writing learning stories to meet a quota or having the time to write authentic stories that are invested with personal meaning. Such challenges speak to systemic issues with staffing, funding, ratios and time for teachers to do work outside of their interaction with children. The draft *Early Learning Strategic Plan* identifies these as priority areas, and thus the findings of the study affirm the call for policy and funding shifts to address systemic barriers to effective assessment practice.

5.5. Meeting the needs and expectations of third party audiences

Both teachers and parents highlighted an awareness of the influence of third party audiences in the way learning stories are crafted and shared. Both teachers and parents identified things that they *knew* ‘had to be’ in a learning story, or spoke of practices that ‘must be’ followed. Often such comments were linked to features or practices that were not personally valued but were rationalised by participants as simply ‘needing’ to be there for a third party regulatory purpose. The notion that valued features can be influenced by outside audiences and the potential tension that this brings is consistent with previous research. For example, documenting learning stories for a wider range of audiences, other

than a child and their family, was noted by Davis (2006) to be due to requirements related to formal assessment documentation by external regulatory bodies such as the Education Review Office and The Education Council (now Teaching Council Aotearoa New Zealand).

Niles (2016) suggests a tension may present for teachers with respect to documenting for external evaluation purposes compared to potentially different values and audiences within some settings. To this degree, teachers may feel conflicted with competing and increasing pressures with what to foreground in their assessments. The presenting dilemma from such findings suggests that learning stories may currently be used to meet competing and at times different needs. Evidence of progress and achievement is important in early childhood education however reflection on this potential underlying tension gives weight to the call for enactment of wider assessment approaches to support differing aspirations and requirements.

5.6. Time for teachers and parents to talk to each other about assessment

The findings reveal that despite partnership with families being central to the early childhood education curriculum, there was almost no communication between teachers and parents where shared understandings of assessment could be developed. This is a significant challenge in achieving the mandate for parents to be deeply and meaningfully involved in the assessment process. It is evident that significant shifts are needed in future practice if this aim is to be genuinely met. Given the time teachers invest in writing learning stories, and the emphasis on this tool as the primary assessment method, it was notable that teachers had not engaged directly with parents in conversations about assessment in general, or what they understood and valued in learning stories and why.

Several teachers spoke of 'wondering' what parents thought and all expressed keen interest in what findings from this study would highlight, yet none had simply asked the parents of the children they worked alongside. Conversations during interviews suggested warm and respectful relationships between teachers and parents, which offers a rich platform for such discussions. In order to learn more about parent perspectives and preferences, teachers need time, opportunities, and openings for parents to share and contribute thoughts and values (Katyal & Evers, 2007). Pennells' (2017) case study investigation into parent-teacher partnerships in early childhood education highlighted the features of undisturbed time to talk and teacher availability as key elements that worked as either enablers of two-way partnerships when present, or barriers when they were compromised. Findings from Pennells' (2017) study noted that most communication

occurred during drop-off and pick-up times when these two elements were largely compromised. Research into the use of e-portfolios in early childhood education has highlighted the potential for increased collaboration and engagement with parents and suggests that this platform is a possible way to deepen partnerships with parents (Goodman, 2013a, 2013b; Higgins & Cherrington, 2017; Hooker, 2015, 2016). Digitalising communication however does need to be balanced with opportunities for face-to-face communication, highlighting the ongoing need for exploring more adaptable ways and differing mediums with which to engage with parents (Pennells, 2017), particularly in response to cultural diversity. The Education Review Office's (2008) guidelines for best practice in developing collaborative relationships with parents puts emphasis on teacher availability and accessibility whilst also highlighting cultural responsiveness and approachability as desirable features.

Discussion here has only attempted to surmise possibilities as to why informal conversations on valued practices has seemingly not occurred between teachers and parents about features valued in learning stories. These missed opportunities for conversations about learning stories are an area worthy of further investigation.

5.7. Strengths and limitations

Qualitative research is well recognised for the strength it brings to illuminating participant voices and insights into complex phenomena (Anderson, 2010). As such, the qualitative approach of this study has afforded detailed understanding of teacher and parent perspectives on learning stories within two early childhood settings. The opportunity to compare the perspectives of two key stakeholders was a particular strength of the study.

The design of this study was uniquely and intentionally context and case bound and therefore delimited in nature. Delimitations of this study, that is the exclusionary and inclusionary decisions that were established for this study, have been well explained throughout this study with clear rationale. Transferability, that is the applicability of this study's findings to other contexts (Yin, 2003), has however been enhanced through the clear and comprehensive descriptions of the methodology undertaken, setting, and participant profiles. The inclusion of two settings within this case-bound analysis has worked to support a broad sample of participants however it is acknowledged that participants in this study were predominantly New Zealand European and therefore the sample was not representative of the wider ethnic make-up of New Zealand.

Two recognised limitations of this study are the nature of interview protocols and the novice interview skills of the researcher. It is acknowledged that question form and interview approach influence the nature of the responses given, and therefore inferences remain tentative as to what might not have been said. Gaps in this sense may not reflect practitioner knowledge or beliefs, but rather whether the questions served well to capture that information or the researcher ascertained appropriate opportunities to probe further. Where discussion does report on gaps in response data, this is supported through reference to previous coding categories from the original research project and deducted from literature. To support the validity of the interview process member checking of interpretation occurred during participant interviews to test out understanding of messages conveyed. To further strengthen the overall credibility of this study a member check with participants at the completion of this study could have been included, to be certain that the data presented includes no internal conflicts or misinterpretations (Guba, 1981).

The degree to which this study remained neutral from researcher bias and represented the participant's views could have been strengthened through the inclusion of inter-observer coding during data analysis and also through the consideration of an additional data collection method, such as a survey or questionnaire to support further triangulation of findings. However, while these two specific features would have worked to further support the confirmability of this study's findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), they were not deemed necessary within the constraints of a Master's thesis, and therefore present an opportunity for further research.

This study was aimed not at finding concrete answers but rather to consider different perspectives and understand others' thoughts, values, and ideas. In this sense, the study aimed to gain a broad perspective on an area not well documented. Overall, the design of this study has worked with effect to realise this intent. The study offers new insight into both teacher and parent perspectives, and has highlighted that while there are some shared understandings and expectations, there are significant differences in perspectives between these groups.

5.8. Summary statement

What makes a great story? The findings of the present study have suggested that there is not a definitive answer to this broad question and considers that each stakeholder will have a unique perspective of the practices and features personally valued as 'good' in a learning story. Both teachers and parents in this study valued different aspects of learning stories, driven by different motivations and shaped by differing understandings of the

nature and purpose of assessment. Eight key practices and features of learning stories aligned for teachers and parents and were collectively valued. These eight practices and features constituted the majority of features determined by this study's data, making the alignment of commonly shared elements greater in number than those disparately held by teachers and parents. Yet, the differences in valued practices and features were significant in nature and have yielded a range of questions about who a learning story is written to, for what purpose, and why. Questions have also been raised on the resourcing support for the writing of quality learning stories, alongside advocacy for wider assessment methods to become more prevalent in practice in order to meet the multifaceted needs of early childhood assessment. The current study underscores the importance of collaborative partnerships with parents in which parents engage with assessment in the context of open and accessible relationships that encourage ongoing and direct dialogue in this area.

The effective writing of learning stories is layered and complex and this study has provided a unique insight into the valued-laden perspectives of two main stakeholders, teachers and parents. Learning stories offer rich potential for assessment information to be co-constructed, documented, and shared, however without an awareness of the values and views of key partners in this process the framework cannot deliver to its intended potential. Further research has been advocated through the findings of this study so that the story this study has presented is 'recognised and responded to' in order to support wider understandings and considerations for effective learning story practice to emerge.

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Appendix G: Learning Stories Project Teacher Interview Tool and Protocol

Appendix H: Parent Interview Tool and Protocol

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Appendix K: A-priori and Emerging Codes from Preliminary Data Reduction

Appendix L: Massey University Human Ethics Committee Consent

Appendix A: Information Sheet for Centre Owner / Manager



Institute of Education, Massey University Manawatū
Private Bag 11-222
Palmerston North 4442
New Zealand

What makes a great story? Teacher and parent perspectives of quality learning stories in early childhood education

INFORMATION FOR CENTRE OWNER/MANAGER



Kia ora. My name is Ellie Salčin-Watts and I am studying towards a Master of Education at Massey University. As part of this qualification I am completing a thesis. I am interested in parent and teacher perspectives on what makes a good learning story.

In New Zealand early childhood education, learning stories are the most common form of assessment, and teachers use a variety of approaches towards writing these. Despite learning stories wide-scale use, what constitutes a quality learning story from the perspectives of teachers and parents has not been well researched.

The questions shaping this project are based around exploring:

1. What are teachers' perspectives of the key quality features and practices in learning stories?
2. What are parents' perspectives of the key quality features and practices in learning stories?
3. What is the alignment between these two perspectives?

The focus of this small-scale study is to investigate teacher and parent perspectives on what makes a 'good' learning story and a 'not so good' learning story. The purpose of the study is to gain a deeper understanding on what is valued in the learning story assessment approach from the perspectives of teachers and parents. It is anticipated this study will contribute towards wider thinking about the ways teachers use and write learning stories to share valued information with parents.

I would like to invite your centre to participate in this research study. My research is of a qualitative nature and teachers' day to day programmes and routines will not be interrupted by my presence. Data for the purposes of this study will be collected through semi-structured individual teacher and parent interviews. Individual interviews are anticipated to be 20-30 minutes in length and these will be audio recorded. A maximum of 10 interviews would take place, inclusive of both teachers and parents. The majority of interviews would take place onsite your centre at times and in a space convenient to you. If you agree to participate, with your assistance I would approach teachers and parents to request consent.

Should you agree to your setting participating, your involvement will be:

1. Sharing your assessment procedures with me, including assessment policies.
2. Working with me to approach teachers and parents to obtain consent.
3. Enabling face-to-face interviews to take place with teacher and parent participants through the use of a suitable space at your centre

All data gathered for this study will be kept in a secure and confidential manner and used for the purpose of exploring teacher and parent perspectives on quality learning stories and any publications that arise from this work. Confidentiality and anonymity of your setting and individual participants would be maintained through the use of pseudonyms, no identifiable information will be shared, and all data summaries will reflect the cumulative list of quality features without reference or connection to specific individual participants or settings. You, and all participants, would also be given a 1-2 page summary of the results of the study when it is completed.

The present study also aims to contribute data towards a wider research initiative based at the Institute of Education at Massey University for a project referred to as *The Learning Stories Project* (McLaughlin, Cameron, Dean, & Aspden, 2016). For this purpose, de-

identified data will be shared with my lead supervisor and leader of *The Learning Stories Project* Team for comparison of key themes with data collected from other de-identified settings. Shared data will be stored on the secure Massey University server. Data will be kept for five years following the study, before it will be destroyed.

Your permission for your settings participation is voluntary and you are under no obligation to accept this invitation. Should you give permission, I will also individually consent interested teachers and parents on a voluntary basis; enrolling up to 10 possible participants for your site.

Teachers and parents that decide to participate will have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the project at any time;
- contact me, or my supervisors, at any time throughout the study if you have comments or questions, and;
- provide information on the understanding that names will not be used and that name of your setting or identifying features of your centre will not be used unless setting permission is given to the researcher.

If you would like to participate in this study, I would like to meet with you to gain written permission and look at next steps.

Thank you in advance for your consideration towards this project.

Ellie Salcin-Watts

Telephone: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Supervisor Contact Details

Tara McLaughlin, Senior Lecturer
Institute of Education
Phone 06 356 9099 ext 84312
t.w.mclaughlin@massey.ac.nz

Karyn Aspden, Lecturer
Institute of Education
Phone 06 356 9099 ext 84389
K.M.Aspden@massey.ac.nz

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Dr Brian Finch, Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 3569099 extn 86015, email: humanethics@massey.ac.nz

Appendix B: Centre Owner / Manager Permission Form



Institute of Education, Massey University Manawatū
Private Bag 11-222
Palmerston North 4442
New Zealand

What makes a great story? Teacher and parent perspectives of quality learning stories in early childhood education

MANAGER/OWNER CENTRE PERMISSION FORM

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I *give / do not give* permission for the researcher to contact teachers and parents at [add in centre name] to invite their participation in this research under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature:

Date:

.....

.....

Full Name - Printed

.....

Appendix C: Information Sheet for Teachers



Institute of Education, Massey University Manawatū
Private Bag 11-222
Palmerston North 4442
New Zealand

What makes a great story? Teacher and parent perspectives of quality learning stories in early childhood education

INFORMATION FOR TEACHER PARTICIPANTS



Kia ora. My name is Ellie Salčin-Watts and I am studying towards a Master of Education at Massey University. As part of this qualification I am completing a thesis. I am interested in parent and teacher perspectives on what makes a good learning story.

In New Zealand early childhood education, learning stories are the most common form of assessment, and teachers use a variety of approaches towards writing these. Despite learning stories wide-scale use, what constitutes a quality learning story from the perspectives of teachers and parents has not been well researched.

The questions shaping this project are based around exploring:

1. What are teachers' perspectives of the key quality features and practices in learning stories?
2. What are parents' perspectives of the key quality features and practices in learning stories?
3. What is the alignment between these two perspectives?

The focus of this small-scale study is to investigate teacher and parent perspectives on what makes a 'good' learning story and what makes a 'not so good' learning story. The

purpose of the study is to gain a deeper understanding on what is valued in the learning story assessment approach from the perspectives of teachers and parents. It is anticipated this study will contribute towards wider thinking about the ways teachers use and write learning stories to share valued information with parents.

I would like to invite you to participate in the present study. Your day to day teaching will not be interrupted or affected by participation.

Should you agree to participate, this would include the following:

1. Providing the researcher with information about you, including gender, ethnicity, teaching qualifications, and how long you have been teaching, for summative descriptive purpose only
2. Participation in a face-to-face semi-structured interview with the researcher. The interview is expected to last between 20-30 minutes and will be scheduled at a time convenient to you. This interview will be arranged to take place at [*insert early childhood centre name*]. If you prefer a different location for your interview, this can be discussed with the researcher. Before the interview you will select one example, from your own practice, of what you think makes a good learning story and one example of a learning story you have written that you think needs improvement. The learning stories you select will be shared by you and discussed at your interview. To enable accurate recording of the interview an audio recording will be used that will later be transcribed. The transcribed data will be given to you for approval and emendation before being used.

All data gathered for this study will be kept in a secure and confidential manner and used for the purpose of exploring teacher and parent perspectives on quality learning stories and any publications that arise from this work. Confidentiality and anonymity of all participant names and the associated setting will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms, no identifiable information will be shared, and all data summaries will reflect the cumulative list of quality features without reference or connection to specific individual participants or settings. You, and all participants, will be given a 1-2 page summary of the results of the study when it is completed.

The present study also aims to contribute data towards a wider research initiative based at the Institute of Education at Massey University for a project referred to as *The Learning Stories Project* (McLaughlin, Cameron, Dean, & Aspden, 2016). For this purpose, de-identified data will be shared with my lead supervisor and leader of *The Learning Stories*

Project Team for comparison of key themes with data collected from other de-identified settings. Shared data will be stored on the secure Massey University server. Data will be kept for five years following the study, before it will be destroyed.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to accept this invitation. Should you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the project at any time;
- contact me, or my supervisors, at any time throughout the study if you have comments or questions, and;
- provide information on the understanding that names will not be used and that name of your setting or identifying features of your centre will not be used unless setting permission is given to the researcher.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me.

If you agree to participate in this study, please complete the attached consent form and return it to me in the envelope provided by [Day/Month].

I am looking forward to working with you and thank you in advance for your consideration towards this project.

Ellie Salcin-Watts

Telephone: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Supervisor Contact Details

Tara McLaughlin, Senior Lecturer
Institute of Education
Phone 06 356 9099 ext 84312
t.w.mclaughlin@massey.ac.nz

Karyn Aspden, Lecturer
Institute of Education
Phone 06 356 9099 ext 84389
K.M.Aspden@massey.ac.nz

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Dr Brian Finch, Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 3569099 extn 86015, email: humanethics@massey.ac.nz

Appendix D: Information Sheet for Parents



Institute of Education, Massey University Manawatū
Private Bag 11-222
Palmerston North 4442
New Zealand

What makes a great story? Teacher and parent perspectives of quality learning stories in early childhood education

INFORMATION FOR PARENT PARTICIPANTS



Kia ora. My name is Ellie Salčin-Watts and I am studying towards a Master of Education at Massey University. As part of this qualification I am completing a thesis. I am interested in parent and teacher perspectives on what makes a good learning story.

In New Zealand early childhood education, learning stories are the most common form of assessment, and teachers use a variety of approaches towards writing these. Despite learning stories wide-scale use, what constitutes a quality learning story from the perspectives of teachers and parents has not been well researched.

The questions shaping this project are based around exploring:

1. What are teachers' perspectives of the key quality features and practices in learning stories?
2. What are parents' perspectives of the key quality features and practices in learning stories?
3. What is the alignment between these two perspectives?

The focus of this small-scale study is to investigate teacher and parent perspectives on what makes a 'good' learning story and what makes a 'not so good' learning story. The purpose of the study is to gain a deeper understanding on what is valued in the learning

story assessment approach from the perspectives of teachers and parents. It is anticipated this study will contribute towards wider thinking about the ways teachers use and write learning stories to share valued information with parents.

I would like to invite you to participate in the present study. The number of parent participants has been limited to [*insert number once teacher participant numbers are confirmed*]. This number is considered as being a valid, reliable, and manageable number for the purposes of this project. The first xx [*number*] of parent consent forms received will be accepted for participation in this study.

Should you agree to participate, this would include the following:

1. Providing the researcher with information about you, including gender, ethnicity, and how long your child/children have attended early childhood education, for summative descriptive purpose only
2. Participation in a face-to-face interview with the researcher. The interview is expected to last between 20-30 minutes and will be scheduled at a time convenient to you. This interview will be arranged to take place at [*insert early childhood centre name*]. If you prefer a different location for your interview, this can be discussed with the researcher. Before the interview you will select one example of what you think makes a good learning story and one example of a learning story that you think needs improvement. The learning stories you select will be shared and discussed at your interview. To enable accurate recording of the interview an audio recording will be used that will later be transcribed. The transcribed data will be given to you for approval and emendation before being used.

All data gathered for this study will be kept in a secure and confidential manner and used for the purpose of exploring teacher and parent perspectives on quality learning stories and any publications that arise from this work. Confidentiality and anonymity of all participant names and the associated setting will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms, no identifiable information will be shared, and all data summaries will reflect the cumulative list of quality features without reference or connection to specific individual participants or settings. You, and all participants, will be given a 1-2 page summary of the results of the study when it is completed.

The present study also aims to contribute data towards a wider research initiative based at the Institute of Education at Massey University for a project referred to as *The Learning Stories Project* (McLaughlin, Cameron, Dean, & Aspden, 2016). For this purpose, de-identified data will be shared with my lead supervisor and leader of *The Learning Stories Project* Team for comparison of key themes with data collected from other de-identified settings. Shared data will be stored on the secure Massey University server. Data will be kept for five years following the study, before it will be destroyed.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to accept this invitation. Should you decide to participate, you will have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the project at any time;
- contact me, or my supervisors, at any time throughout the study if you have comments or questions, and;
- provide information on the understanding that names will not be used and that name of your setting or identifying features of your centre will not be used unless setting permission is given to the researcher.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me.

If you agree to participate in this study, please complete the attached consent form and return it to me in the envelope provided by [Day/Month].

I am looking forward to working with you and thank you in advance for your consideration towards this project.

Ellie Salcin-Watts

Telephone: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Supervisor Contact Details

Tara McLaughlin, Senior Lecturer
Institute of Education
Phone 06 356 9099 ext 84312
t.w.mclaughlin@massey.ac.nz

Karyn Aspden, Lecturer
Institute of Education
Phone 06 356 9099 ext 84389
K.M.Aspden@massey.ac.nz

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Dr Brian Finch, Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 3569099 extn 86015, email: humanethics@massey.ac.nz

Appendix E: Teacher Participant Consent Form



Institute of Education, Massey University Manawatū
Private Bag 11-222
Palmerston North 4442
New Zealand

What makes a great story? Teacher and parent perspectives of quality learning stories in early childhood education

TEACHER CONSENT FORM

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

I agree / do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.

Signature:

Date:

.....

.....

Full Name - Printed

.....

Appendix F: Parent Participant Consent Form



Institute of Education, Massey University Manawatū
Private Bag 11-222
Palmerston North 4442
New Zealand

What makes a great story? Teacher and parent perspectives of quality learning stories in early childhood education

PARENT CONSENT FORM

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

I agree / do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.

Signature:

Date:

.....

.....

Full Name - Printed

.....

Appendix G:
Learning Stories Project Teacher Interview Tool and Protocol

Examining the Quality Features of Learning Stories

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interview Conducted By: _____

Teacher: _____

Date: _____

Location: Teacher's centre Other: _____

Interview Recorded by: ___Audio ___Hand notes

Welcome 'Script': Open the meeting with a welcoming and appreciative tone. Share with the teacher that this interview is designed to help identify teacher perspectives about quality features of learning stories.

Prior to meeting teachers were asked to nominate a learning story or two that they identified as high quality and a learning story they identified as needing improvement. Confirm the teacher has brought a few nominated learning stories.

Remind the teacher we will ask about their choices using a series of guiding questions. Inform the teacher that the information they share is confidential and non-identifiable and that s/he can ask to stop at any time.

Encourage participants to speak openly and honestly about their perspectives of learning stories. Provide the teacher an opportunity to ask questions about the project or interview before you begin. Remind participants that we are thankful for their participation and commitment to the project.

Format/Structure of the Interview: Semi-structured. The following provides a guide to be used during the interview. The **overarching guiding question(s)** provide a general guide to prompt teachers to talk about the learning stories they identified. The **follow up (probe) questions** might be used to have the teacher talk about their choices more specifically. For each interview start with **the overarching question** and **decide which probe questions are needed** (if any). It is not necessary to ask all guiding questions.

Working Definition - Learning stories are narrative descriptions of a child's learning based on formal and informal observation and information gathering techniques. Learning stories identify and interpret child learning they may focus on dispositions but are not limited to dispositions and typically includes photos but moving towards other forms of media.

1. Let's start with high-quality. Tell me about the learning story you selected.

Probe questions:

- Tell me more about why you selected this story for high-quality.
- What's most important to you about this story?
- How did this learning story come together?
- How has the child or child's family interacted with this story?

2. Tell me about what makes a good learning story?

Probe questions:

- What do you think of when you hear the phrase 'learning story'?
- Describe your process for creating a learning story.
- How do you engage a child or group of children in a learning story?
- What does the teaching team discuss related to learning stories?

3. When you were making choices about the learning stories you would bring today, what features were you thinking about?

Probe questions:

- Tell me more about why those features were important to you.
- Do these features change based the child's age?
- What about children's learning are you trying to assess when you use learning stories?

4. Let's look at the 'needs improvement' learning story. Tell me about the learning story you selected.

Probe questions:

- Tell me more about why you selected this story for needing improvement?
- What would you do differently?
- What resources might you use to guide you to improve this learning story?

5. Do you have any other comments about learning stories that you would like share?

Appendix H: Parent Interview Tool and Protocol

Examining the Quality Features of Learning Stories – Parent Interview Protocol

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interview Conducted By: Ellie Salcin-Watts

Parent: _____

Date: _____

Location: Early Childhood Centre Other: _____

Interview Recorded by: ___Audio

Welcome ‘Script’: I will open the meeting with a welcoming and appreciative tone. Share with the parent that this interview is designed to help identify parent perspectives about quality features of learning stories.

Prior to meeting parents were asked to nominate a learning story that they identified as high quality and a learning story they identified as needing improvement. I will confirm that the parent has brought the nominated learning stories. Remind the parent that I will ask about their choices using a series of guiding questions. Inform the parent that the information they share is confidential and non-identifiable and that s/he can ask to stop at any time.

Encourage participants to speak openly and honestly about their perspectives of learning stories. Provide the parent an opportunity to ask questions about my study or interview before I begin. Remind participants that I am thankful for their participation and commitment to this study.

Format/Structure of the Interview: Semi-structured. The following provides a guide that I will use during the interview. The **overarching guiding question(s)** provide a general guide to prompt parents to talk about the learning stories they identified. The **follow up (probe) questions** might be used to have the parent talk about their choices more specifically. For each interview I will start with **the overarching question** and **decide which probe questions are needed** (if any).

Working Definition - Learning stories are narrative descriptions of a child's learning based on formal and informal observation and information gathering techniques. Learning stories identify and interpret child learning they may focus on dispositions but are not limited to dispositions and typically includes photos but moving towards other forms of media.

1. Let's start with high-quality. Tell me about the learning story you selected.

Probe questions:

- Tell me more about why you selected this story for high-quality.
- What's most important to you about this story?
- Was this a story that you contributed to? How?
- How have you, or other family members, used this story?

2. Tell me about what you think makes a good learning story?

Probe questions:

- What do you think of when you hear the phrase 'learning story'?
- What makes a learning story attractive to read, share, and keep?
- What do you think is important for teachers to include, or focus on, in a learning story?
- When you were making choice about the learning stories you would bring today, what features were important to you in your selection of a good learning story?

3. What do you think your child likes the most about learning stories in his/her portfolio?

Probe questions:

- Are there some stories in your child's portfolio that your child enjoys re-reading more than others? What is it about these stories that makes them more popular with your child?
- What features of learning stories do you think hold importance for your child?

4. Let's look at the 'needs improvement' learning story. Tell me about the learning story you selected.

Probe questions:

- Tell me more about why you selected this story for needing improvement?
 - What would you have liked to have been different in this learning story?
 - Why do you think the teacher would have written this story this way?
- 5. Do you have any other comments about learning stories that you would like share?**

Appendix I: Transcribers Confidentiality Agreement



Institute of Education, Massey University Manawatū
Private Bag 11-222
Palmerston North 4442
New Zealand

What makes a great story? Teacher and parent perspectives of quality learning stories in early childhood education

TRANSCRIBER'S CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

I (Full Name - printed) agree to transcribe the recordings provided to me.

I agree to keep confidential all the information provided to me.

I will not make any copies of the transcripts or keep any record of them, other than those required for the project.

Signature:

.....

Date:

.....

Appendix J: Transcript Release Authority



Institute of Education, Massey University Manawatū
Private Bag 11-222
Palmerston North 4442
New Zealand

What makes a great story? Teacher and parent perspectives of quality learning stories in early childhood education

AUTHORITY FOR THE RELEASE OF TRANSCRIPTS

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interview conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used in reports and publications arising from the research.

Signature:

Date:

.....

Full Name - Printed

.....

Appendix K:
A Priori and Emerging Codes from Preliminary Data Reduction

Code Book Origin	Generation of Initial Codes Step 2 of Data Reduction E= Emerging APLit = A priori code derived from literature APLSP= A priori code from <i>The Learning Stories Project</i> (McLaughlin, Cameron, Dean, & Aspden, 2016)
APLSP	Personal Connection – Meaningful to child
APLSP	Continuity – Connections across stories
APLSP	Image of the Child - Identity and holistic
APLSP	Child voice included in story
APLSP	Makes links to learning (broadly defined)
APLSP	Making links to important documents
APLSP	Connection for teacher
APLSP	Use to educate parents
APLSP	Informal sharing of learning stories with families
APLSP	Informal sharing of learning stories with children
APLSP	Different types of learning stories (or other artefacts)
APLSP	Story well-presented
APLSP	Connect to parent aspirations
APLSP	Teacher involvement in story
APLSP	Bicultural connections in story
APLSP	Contextual information included
APLSP	Focus on child strengths
APLSP	Multiple perspectives gathered
APLSP	Share and re-visit learning (child and family)
APLSP	Consider future learning
APLSP	Deepen teachers knowledge of child
APLit	Relationships highlighted
APLit	Sociocultural assessment

APLit	Formative assessment approach
APLit	Inclusion of photographs or artefacts
APLit	Group learning stories
APLit	Notice-Recognise-Respond format
APLit	Portfolios / revisiting of stories
E	Well written
E	Length of story
E	Timely sharing of stories
E	Filler stories
E	Teacher confidence
E	Snapshot of a child's life
E	Not connected to curriculum but still high quality
E	No parent contribution but still quality
E	Fluid
E	"At this age" (quality concept linked to age)
E	Photos engage child
E	Meaningful photos for child
E	Linked to curriculum and considered not high quality by parent
E	"Have to's" – parent perception of a learning story 'must'
E	Cumulative record of early years valued by parents
E	"What they've been up to"
E	Care highlighted for parents
E	Developmental milestones
E	Parental value of portfolio
E	Hard to find poor quality learning story
E	Parent perception of story purpose misaligned
E	Effort and time
E	Good 'feedback'
E	'Enjoyment' – high quality linked to parental enjoyment
E	Detailed story=high quality
E	"Love to hear"
E	Reinforces confidence in centre
E	Documented parent voice not needed for high quality
E	Not academic
E	'Need to know'

E	Fresh perspective of child
E	Story not personalised
E	Photographs not needed for high quality
E	Teacher perception of a LS must
E	'Wow moments' =high quality

Appendix L: Massey University Human Ethics Committee Consent



Date: 01 November 2017

Dear Ellie Salcin-Watts

Re: Ethics Notification - 4000018632 - What makes a great story? Teacher and parent perspectives of quality learning stories in early childhood education.

Thank you for your notification which you have assessed as Low Risk.

Your project has been recorded in our system which is reported in the Annual Report of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

The low risk notification for this project is valid for a maximum of three years.

If situations subsequently occur which cause you to reconsider your ethical analysis, please contact a Research Ethics Administrator.

Please note that travel undertaken by students must be approved by the supervisor and the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor and be in accordance with the Policy and Procedures for Course-Related Student Travel Overseas. In addition, the supervisor must advise the University's Insurance Officer.

A reminder to include the following statement on all public documents:

"This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research."

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Dr Brian Finch, Director - Ethics, telephone 06 3569099 ext 86015, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz."

Please note, if a sponsoring organisation, funding authority or a journal in which you wish to publish requires evidence of committee approval (with an approval number), you will have to complete the application form again, answering "yes" to the publication question to provide more information for one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. You should also note that such an approval can only be provided prior to the commencement of the research.

Yours sincerely