Teachers' Perspectives of Learning Stories and their Implementation in Dubai

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Abstract

The New Zealand developed, narrative assessment approach referred to as learning stories is increasingly gathering interest in international early childhood education (ECE) settings. Yet relatively few studies have explored the implementation of the learning stories approach in non-New Zealand settings. This study explored the perspectives of teachers using learning stories in an ECE setting in Dubai. Positioned within an interpretivist paradigm, this research endeavoured to explore the ways in which teachers understand and interpret learning stories as well as teachers' perspectives related to the quality features of learning stories in this unique context.

The research was conducted through qualitative case study design in which the perspectives of six teachers from one setting were collected through semi structured in-depth interview. Inductive data analysis was used to examine teacher's perspectives through two levels of coding, which were then further developed into key themes. Findings are discussed in terms of the similarities and differences evident between Dubai, New Zealand and other international ECE settings. These topics highlight contextually common challenges, advantages and critiques of the learning story approach and alternative methods to implementation are highlighted and discussed in terms of curriculum and pedagogy. This research seeks to expand on research related to learning stories in New Zealand and to contribute to a wider understanding of learning stories and their implementation in an international context.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The aim of this study is to understand how learning stories, an emerging, narrative assessment method, are implemented and understood by early childhood teachers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The research extends on current research in New Zealand that has examined quality features of learning stories, from teachers' perspectives (cf. McLaughlin, Cameron, Dean, & Aspden, 2016). Understanding how an assessment method, such as learning stories which was developed in New Zealand, is enacted and understood in an international context such as the UAE, provides an opportunity to explore contextual differences in perceptions of quality features.

Defining quality features of assessment is often described as being problematic, given that notions of quality have different purposes and meanings to different stakeholders (Dunn, 2004; Blaiklock, 2008; Perkins, 2013; Zhang, 2016). In any given context, culture, or country, quality and the nature of assessment approaches vary in description and value. Assessment is particularly influenced by curriculum, such that principles and values embraced in early childhood curriculum will influence the processes valued for assessment.

To set the context for this research this chapter will describe the early childhood education (ECE) context in the UAE, as well as international influences on curriculum and assessment, and then background information about learning stories as an assessment method developed in New Zealand will be briefly described. The chapter will also include information about the researcher's background, the rationale for the research, and the organisation of the thesis.

1.1 ECE Context in the United Arab Emirates

ECE in the UAE is unique. The multicultural community of expatriates live alongside the local people of the Emirates, who are the population minority. The national Emirati children account for only 5% of total children registered in early childhood settings across the UAE and all early childhood centres or nurseries are privately owned (Bennett Report, 2009). In terms of policy or curriculum, there is no standardisation of pedagogy or practice in ECE. In my experience of working within nurseries (i.e., ECE settings) in Dubai since 2005, the majority choose the English national curriculum, *Statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (Department for Education, 2017) to guide practice. Only in the last year are teaching staff required by the Ministry of Education to have a certification or graduate degree to work within an ECE setting. Without a mandated national curriculum, and with Ministry of Education regulatory inspections currently reviewing only four quality standards including *Organisation and Management*; *Child Safety*; *Services and Care*; and *Building and Resources* (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education, 2018), each settings' pedagogical and assessment practices often reflect the individual style and culture of the expatriate people leading and working within it.

Regional education reforms pose inherent challenges in terms of government policy and accountability for ECE. Baker (2014) investigated the tensions between research, policy and practice in ECE and noted the high priority given to raising educational achievement within Abu Dhabi, the capital of the UAE, as part of its long-term economic plan. This has led to increased investment and at the same time, greater accountability to government and the introduction of an education reform policy (Abu Dhabi Educational Council, 2014). The policy emphasises the importance of play in ECE and at the same time academic performance. However, Baker's

(2014) research that investigates teachers' perspectives of play, suggests that practice and pedagogy has shifted towards more 'formal' primary school approaches to teaching in the early years and is less devoted to a holistic pedagogy of play. While the UAE government recognises the need for education reform and is ready to support and invest in the early years through research and policy development, it seems that currently vision, policy and practice are divided (Baker, 2014).

1.2 International Influences in the UAE: Curriculum and Assessment

In the UAE, the Ministry of Education does not mandate one specific early childhood curriculum, and therefore privately owned and managed early childhood settings implement an international curriculum of choice. The primary curriculum adopted within Dubai is the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), and less frequently implemented is the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). These curriculums might be described as similar by nature, with comparable descriptions of play and purpose. Within both frameworks play is recognised as providing children experiences for exploration, and opportunities through which they make sense of their world (McLachlan, Edwards, Margrain & McLean, 2013). These developmentally framed curriculums sit within constructivist perspectives of early childhood education and development. While other curriculums, such as the Creative Curriculum, Canadian Curriculum or methods such as Montessori are implemented in the UAE, they are very few. Given the EYFS and NAEYC are two frameworks acknowledged in the UAE, Table 1. provides a brief overview of the assessment approaches recommended in these two prevailing international curriculum models, in relation to purpose, methods, and the role of the parent.

Table 1. International ECE Curriculum in the UAE

	EYFS*a*	NAEYC*b*
Purpose of Assessment	Recognise child progress, understand needs, levels of achievement, interests and learning styles to support planned activities	Plan and tailor according to child strength and needs Identify progress and developmental intervention where needed Program and teaching improvement
Assessment Methods	- Portfolio - Ongoing, formative assessment through observation - Progress check at age two - Assessment profile at end of EYFS that identifies if child *meets*, *exceeds*, or is *not reaching expected levels*	Comprehensive assessment plans through variety of informal and informal methods - Portfolio - Observation - Checklists - Rating Scales - Individually administered tests - Written reports twice yearly - Family/teacher conferences
Parent Role in Assessment	Observations are shared by and with parents and carers Assessment informs parents and carers….	Communication and involvement with family through shared observations from home

a Department for Education (2017). *Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage.* Retrieved from http://www.foundationyears.org.uk
b National Association for the Education of Young Children (2018). *NAEYC early learning program accreditation standards and assessment items: Approved by the NAEYC council on the accreditation of early learning programs.* Retrieved from https://www.naeyc.org

Examining approaches to assessment within these two curriculum documents demonstrates overlapping discourse. For example, similarities related to assessment purpose show NAEYC emphasises that assessment plays a key role in identifying areas of child development that potentially require intervention support, while EYFS underlines the requirement to measure child progress and developmental needs. A common purpose to identify the child's learning and needs, as well as progress and achievement, is recognised between these two international contexts.

In terms of method, NAEYC are specific in their explanation and expectations of informal and formal assessment methods. They list examples such as, portfolios, observations, twice yearly written reports, checklists, rating scales, tests and developmental screening. EYFS do not specifically note the need for informal and formal methods but the approaches listed suggest that both informal and formal methods are expected. This includes a progress check or summary at the age of two and measures of a child's readiness for school for formal methods; with portfolios and ongoing observation for informal methods. Across both documents there is also expectation for sharing of assessment information with parents as well as some expectation to gather assessment information from parents.

Consistent with the developmental focus of these curriculums, it is not surprising the recommended assessment approaches require a developmental approach that checks children's learning and achievement progress against development indicators or curriculum objectives. The extent to which these types of developmental assessment approaches are used in the UAE vary greatly between settings. This variance may be connected to the overall diversity of staff qualifications presently held by early years practitioners in the UAE, the employment of unqualified staff in teaching positions, and inconsistent leadership and governance by the Ministry of Education.

Another influence on curriculum and assessment in the UAE has been through the awareness and implementation of learning stories as an assessment approach. Expatriate early childhood teachers in the UAE, who have experience implementing learning story practices in previous international settings such as England, Australia and New Zealand, have incorporated this assessment tool into local early childhood practices.

The learning stories approach emerges from the sociocultural perspective that underpins *Te Whāriki*, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum framework. *Te Whāriki* states that "learning leads development and occurs in relationships with people, places and things, mediated by participation in valued social and cultural activities" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 61). Such sociocultural perspectives have greatly influenced the assessment approaches utilised in New Zealand services. As lead by the exemplar assessment documents released by the New Zealand Ministry of Education, *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Carr, Lee & Jones, 2004-2009) learning stories are now utilised by reportedly 94% of ECE settings in New Zealand (Zhang, 2016). The learning story approach sought to develop assessment for the learner and evaluation for the teacher, within the sociocultural framework of *Te Whāriki* (Carr, May, Podmore, Cubey, Hatherly & Macartney, 2002). Details about learning stories and their origins are further described in the next section, however, it is important to note that this method is considered a strengths-based approach to formative assessment and was consistent with guidance for assessment offered in the original version of *Te Whāriki* which stated:

> *"Assessment occurs minute by minute as adults listen, watch, and interact with an individual child or with groups of children. These continuous observations provide the basis of information for more in-depth assessment and evaluation that is integral to making decisions on how best to meet children's needs"* (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 20).

This principle became expressed in the use of a narrative assessment approach, that described the story of children's learning, in a process of noticing, recognising and responding to the disposition and interests shown by children.

In 2017, *Te Whāriki* underwent the first review and revision since its inception in 1996, and new principles and perspectives of assessment were considered. The newly updated *Te Whāriki* highlights that assessment should identify where children may require additional support. This is a significant change to the updated edition of *Te Whāriki*, heralding a shift in the curriculum's purpose of assessment in recognising the importance of assessing a child's needs in order to provide focused support.

In terms of method, there is a clear suggestion that in order to track a child's change in learning there is a need to implement and collect varied forms of assessment and evidence of learning. Assessment methods identified within *Te Whāriki* range from informal *in the moment* approaches, to formal documented observations. *Te Whāriki* specifically states, "narrative forms of assessment, such as learning stories may make use of a formative assessment sequence: noticing, recognising, responding, recording and revisiting valued learning" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 63). Further suggested methods for assessment which can be collected in a portfolio include, transcripts of language; annotations of images; samples of children's work; and video or audio samples.

Te Whāriki identifies that assessment requires the reciprocal and responsive engagement of parents, whānau and child. More specifically, it identifies a child's role in contributing to their own and peer assessment, and also the importance of revisiting valued learning experiences. Such involvement is critical to the planning and learning pathway for each child and is underpinned by the four guiding principles of *Te Whāriki*, empowerment; holistic development; family and community; and relationships (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 64). In other words, the overall assessment process, underpinned by the guiding principles, seeks to support and enhance the mana of each child. Mana is described as "the power of being, authority, prestige,

spiritual power, status and control" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 66), and is an integral

element of *Te Whāriki* and assessment in the sociocultural context of early childhood education

in New Zealand.

Despite the different orientations to children's learning, similarities exist between the

three curriculums (*Te Whāriki*, EYFS and NAEYC), in relation to purpose and method of

assessment (McLachlan et al., 2013). Elements are repeated, in terms of assessment's *purpose* to

identify a child's learning, strengths, interests and needs, and *method* in requiring a variety of

assessment samples. However, the priority given to these elements within the guiding

frameworks appear to differ. In *Te Whāriki* there is an emphasis on valuing child empowerment

and agency within a relational and holistic approach. In comparison in the EYFS and NAEYC

curriculums, outcomes or objectives perhaps take greater precedent, with stronger emphasis on

progress and achievement, and identifying where a child needs support or intervention. These

differences in curriculum and assessment discourse reflect the uniqueness of each framework,

and which naturally influence the priorities and practices within each international ECE context.

1.3 The History of Learning Stories Outlined

Learning stories have dominated as the primary form of assessment in ECE in New

Zealand and interest in the approach has seen learning stories adopted in countries such as the

UAE, England, Australia, Canada and Germany. This section offers a brief background to the

development and significance of learning stories within the New Zealand ECE sector over the

last 25 years.

After the release and trialling phase of *Te Whāriki* in ECE settings in 1993 (Carr et al.,

2000), a need for further research was identified in terms of understanding how curriculum,

assessment and evaluation could work collectively to support teaching practices. Subsequently, the Ministry of Education contracted two research projects, coordinated by Margaret Carr, who had played a key role in the development of *Te Whāriki* (Carr et al., 2002). The first, *Project for Assessing Children's Experiences* in 1995 marked the beginning of the learning story framework as an emerging assessment process. This assessment framework connected the strands of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) to dispositions of learning.

Learning stories are defined as:

"stories about learning, documented by teachers, often dictated by children… 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, 2011, p. 260).

Of a narrative nature, learning stories are contextually framed assessments, that capture a piece of learning which the teacher chooses to document, analyse and support through further planned experiences. Central to learning story assessment and *Te Whāriki* are learning dispositions (Carr et al., 2002). Key terms associated with the process of interpreting the learning in a learning story are *describing*, *discussing*, *documenting* and *deciding*, which Carr (2001) calls the four Ds of assessment. Carr explains that this process takes place collectively, with practitioners *describing* an individual's interests and dispositions, *documenting* these in terms of actions, *discussing* together previous experiences or stories and *deciding* what formal or informal opportunities for learning will come next. Closely related are the terms *notice*, *recognise* and *respond*, which are discussed within the Ministry of Education publications *Kei Tua o te Pae, Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* (Carr et al., 2004-2009).

Kei Tua o te Pae is a collection of learning story exemplars from around New Zealand, published as a series of 20 books, designed to support early childhood practitioners implement learning story assessment. The introduction book states, "Exemplars are examples of assessments that make visible learning that is valued so that the learning community (children, families, whanau, teachers, and others) can foster ongoing and diverse learning pathways" (Carr, Lee & Jones, 2004, p. 3). A core approach introduced in this first book are the terms *notice*, *recognise* and *respond*, which offer practitioners guidance in implementing *assessment for learning,* in terms of how to *notice* children's play, *recognise* the learning and consider how to *respond* professionally in the moment (Carr et al., 2004).

Learning stories enable practitioners to focus on learning and teaching that highlights children's strengths and interests through a credit-based approach to assessment. The authors believe that this method of assessment supports a holistic view of children and sense of empowerment because it enables practitioners to "develop their own action research tools" about what is appropriate to assess and evaluate (Carr, May, Podmore, Cubey, Hatherly & Macartney, 2000, p. 4). Embedded in sociocultural pedagogy, a learning story framework of assessment was highlighted as meeting New Zealand's early childhood curriculum principles and needs of individual and community identity. This assessment framework launched with full support from the Ministry of Education, in terms of government funded research projects, professional development courses, and publications such as *Kei Tua o te Pae*. Thus, learning stories became the New Zealand ECE assessment method of choice and have been widely used (Zhang, 2016).

1.4 Researcher's Background

Assessment within ECE New Zealand has long been an area of interest and importance at the centre of my journey as a practitioner and manager. I joined the sector at a time when *Te Whāriki* was still relatively new, and assessment was transitioning from using methods such as checklists and running records, towards the method of learning stories. Similarly, the ECE ten-year strategic plan, *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki* had just been released (Ministry of Education, 2002). One of the strategies in this plan was to improve access to professional development programmes, as well as the development of six Centres of Innovation (COI), with the objective that these settings would conduct action research and contribute to improving New Zealand's quality practices in ECE (Thornton, 2006). This government reform also called for more qualified teachers and with the necessary qualifications it wasn't long before I was positioned in a management role. With concern for the setting's current assessment practices, I successfully applied to and sought help from a year-long government subsidised COI professional development programme that focused on assessment practices and learning stories. This project changed the way our setting practiced assessment; it was also where I developed a strong interest in learning stories as an approach to assessment practices.

Leaving New Zealand with three years of teaching and management experience in ECE, I came to Dubai in 2005. This was before the adoption and implementation of common international curriculums such as the EYFS and during this time teaching was guided by a behavioural process. Consequently, I have experienced ECE in Dubai transition rapidly over the past decade. With steadily changing education reforms and evolving government policy I have seen aims for the education sector shift as the nation's leaders seek a stronger position for education in the UAE to be recognised among leading international education systems.

Considering these optimistic objectives, change is inevitable, and this has pushed education into the spotlight nationwide. I have always seen myself as an advocate and leader in the early years and have supported federal changes. For the past 13 years my role has largely been to increase awareness among teachers, parents and community, about the benefits of quality ECE curriculum and teaching practices. A significant emphasis of this advocacy has been assessment practices, which has incorporated elements of learning story assessment practices and is grounded in supporting sociocultural approaches to teaching and learning.

1.5 Rationale for the Research

Given my experience and interest, I have chosen to focus my study on exploring the way in which learning stories can be adopted in an international context, to further examine practitioners' perspectives of this approach to assessment and to contribute to what appears to be a gap in research surrounding learning stories. Learning story implementation is yet to be examined in the UAE and as will be outlined in the literature review, research that explores the quality features of learning stories is limited, both locally in New Zealand and internationally. The UAE in particular provides a unique expatriate and multicultural setting, with characteristics that may present new perspectives or findings about the implementation process of learning stories in an international context.

1.6 Organisation of the Thesis

An initial investigation of the literature, both nationally and internationally will introduce current perspectives related to learning story quality features and implementation, while highlighting an overall lack of research. The methods chapter will outline the theoretical

framework for the study, followed by the research aim, questions and description of the overall design. The research results will be analysed in chapter four, presenting themes that illuminate the teachers' descriptions of learning stories as implemented and understood in their setting in Dubai. This will be followed by the final chapter which describes the findings in terms of similarities and differences noted between the research setting of focus, and practices internationally and within a New Zealand context. This discussion will also make connections of the implementation methods practiced by the teachers in this setting to broader key features of quality assessment, while at the same time highlighting the teachers' perspectives of the quality features of learning stories.

1.7 Summary

The present study seeks to understand how learning stories are implemented and understood by early childhood teachers in Dubai. The research extends on research about quality features of learning stories and offers an opportunity to explore contextual differences.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to explore research findings related to quality features of learning stories and understand how learning stories are implemented and understood by early childhood teachers. Based on the aims of the present study, this literature review intends to examine first the strengths of the learning story framework of assessment, then highlighting challenges and critique that they have faced. The review will then focus on recent research related to enhancing learning stories and following will investigate learning story research from international contexts, particularly focusing on their implementation, and perceptions related to implementation.

2.1 Research about Learning Stories

As described in the first chapter, since their introduction in 1995, learning stories have been used widely in New Zealand and have also been adopted as an assessment method in other countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and Germany. In their review of the existing learning stories literature, McLaughlin, Cameron, Dean and Aspden (2015) found a total of 42 articles related to learning stories, of which only nine were peer-reviewed research studies. Since their review there have been two additional published studies that present current findings related to learning stories, one in New Zealand, and the most recent from Germany. Given the wide-spread use of learning stories, the limited amount of research on learning stories to date is somewhat surprising. It is useful to note that several NZ-based thesis research projects have investigated topics related to learning stories, however, many of these studies have not been

published. The following section explores key existing studies and literature that highlight some of the strengths and challenges related to the learning story assessment approach, as identified in the New Zealand literature.

2.1.1 Strengths of the Learning Story Framework of Assessment

Much of the earlier research that highlighted strengths of the learning story framework was developed by Carr in New Zealand. This section describes findings from the initial development research and underlines many of the frameworks intended purposes for teaching, learning and assessment. The two early research projects coordinated by Carr (2002) as part of the development of learning stories, indicated that the learning story framework had positive implications in meeting both the objectives of *Te Whāriki* and assessment of teaching and learning. Research that subsequently followed the initial development work has provided further insight into how learning stories have been used and adapted in different ECE contexts and settings in New Zealand.

Between 2008 and 2009 the *Learning Wisdom* Project began an investigation of children's learning journeys. This action research study explored how teachers might support children's awareness of their own learning and the learning of their peers, across nine ECE centres in New Zealand (Carr, 2011). Learning stories are described as a catalyst in this process, as they provided the opportunities for teachers and children to revisit photos and video footage. This highlights one of the key characteristics and strengths of the learning stories approach, that through the provision of media and images children and teachers are able to actively return to previous learning experiences. The findings of this research suggest that learning stories offered a strategy that enabled children and teachers to find mutually interesting points of conversation

through which they regularly reflected on and returned to. Other contributing factors included, the accessibility of learning story portfolios, the family's level of participation, and the quality and sequence of the photos used within the learning story. This study highlights the value of the teacher's balance and attention to "noticing, recognising and responding to children's interests, while at the same time keeping valued early-childhood-learning outcomes in mind" (Carr, 2011, p. 268). This finding underlines a significant strength of the learning story framework, in providing the ability for children to revisit learning experiences through reciprocal, meaningful discussion with teachers.

Assessment-focused dialogue with families and children, as well as between teachers, is highlighted as an essential process for effective learning story assessment. Whyte's (2010) action research to promote parent contribution to assessment began from the setting's observed lack of participation in the '*parent voice form*'. Typically, a parent voice form invites parents to share their observed stories or experiences of their child from home, often in response to a learning story written by a teacher in the ECE setting, as a means of gathering multiple perspectives on the assessed learning, as well as to support continuity between home and ECE setting. Whyte states, "it is the dialogue on what learning has taken place and on how that learning might be extended that turns the learning story into an assessment" (2010, p. 22). Consequently, Whyte decided to introduce an *initiating parent voice* form which changed the timing for parent participation from the end point, to midway through the assessment process. In this new process, when learning was initially noticed, a photo was captured and sent home to the parents along with the initiating parent voice form. Her findings suggested that this process empowered a parent's involvement and contribution to the child's learning experience as a result of increased dialogue and participation; between parents and teachers; teachers and child; and also, between

teachers. This ultimately, changed both teachers' and parents' perspectives and the planning of

learning experiences. Reciprocal discussions throughout the process from the learning

experience to documentation is therefore seen as fundamental to quality assessment and has

powerful implications for supporting a child's learning.

The key features identified between these two studies in terms of strengths identified

within the learning story framework of assessment, relate to the way in which learning stories

foster shared and collaborative discussions, enhance parent and child participation, the

accessibility of portfolios, the power of images and the importance of revisiting learning. These

features align with the aims of *Te Whāriki* and the New Zealand sociocultural early childhood

context, in which the child's, teacher's and parent's combined perspectives and reciprocal

relationships play an important role in delivering enriched learning experiences.

2.1.2 Challenges of Learning Stories

The existing research also highlights challenges related to a learning story approach to

assessment, including the documentation process and issues of authenticity. The documentation

process and implementation of learning story assessment was highlighted in a study by Anthony,

McLachlan and Lim (2015). In their interviews of 13 teachers and sampling of six children's

portfolios across three New Zealand kindergartens, the authors found that teachers' learning

story documentation varied through apparent differences in "philosophical positions concerning

assessment." (2015, p. 391). In one setting teachers believed that learning stories must interpret

and analyse the valued learning, while the other adopted a philosophical view not to assume what

the child was learning in that moment. Another study (Mawson, 2011) interviewed 16 parent

educators of Auckland-based playcentres. Parent educators refer to the teams of parents who

complete a certain level of training and who teach in Playcentres. This study found a tendency to document some areas of learning more than others; learning that was perhaps more meaningful to the parent educator dominated. Mawson states, "as is the case with all early childhood settings there was a great deal of learning taking place in the Playcentre that was not being documented" (2011, p. 48). For example, an over-emphasis on learning related to social relationships and interactions between peers was favoured over mathematic and literacy related experiences.

Such findings affirm the importance of teacher decision making in the learning story writing. It is a subjective process and the teacher evidently plays a significant role in choosing what learning to celebrate through documentation and to support through planning. Anthony et al., (2015) found that teachers were keen to document dispositions over mathematical learning, such that the disposition was a larger focus within the learning story and over shadowed learning related to mathematical language. These findings highlight the impact that teachers' documentation decision making can potentially have on the teaching and learning experiences provided and confirms the need for multiple perspectives and dialogue to support the authenticity of assessment.

The authenticity of learning story assessment, in relation to which stories get written, the lens through which they are written, and the emphasis given, is noted as a concern. Research conducted by Dunn in New Zealand addressed the authenticity of learning story assessment through the four criteria of, "coverage, convergence, agreement, and leverage" (2004, p. 124). *Coverage* suggests that learning considers previous and future learning, in other words the continuity of planned experiences and learning becomes a key factor. *Convergence* recognises the importance of looking at assessment through multiple lenses, and which is followed by

agreement of the learning areas from all perspectives. Finally, *leverage* refers to the purpose of extending quality learning experiences. Mawson's (2011) findings identified that pressure on parent educators to collect a specific number of learning stories per child resulted in obligatory and inauthentic learning story assessment practices. Furthermore, parent educators identified that more could have been done with the learning stories in terms of continuity for planning. In relation to the authenticity criteria listed above, findings from Mawson's (2011) study suggest that *coverage* and *leverage* become an issue.

Similarly, in Anthony's et al., review of the literature they reported that "subjective evaluations on short observations" run the risk of becoming nothing more than descriptive stories that are unable to show learning as it progresses over time (2015, p. 389). Their findings uncovered teachers' general statements of intent made vague attempts at connecting the learning story to further learning opportunities. These concerns of authenticity clearly show an inconsistency between *Te Whāriki* 's assessment objectives to document and track children's, strengths, interests, needs and changes in learning, and the actual learning story assessment practices implemented in these settings. In a Ministry of Education funded evaluation research on the impact of *Kei Tua o te Pae* on professional development, a multiple case study investigated the quality of curriculum and assessment in 24 New Zealand settings (Stuart, Aitken, Gould & Mead, 2008). Findings showed similar challenges related to continuity of learning in some settings, stating "absent in these portfolios was any analysis of learning, evidence of continuity and development" (Stuart et al., 2008, p. 108). This reflects a similar message, suggesting that *coverage* and *leverage* are indeed areas of challenge for settings in New Zealand.

In terms of assessment purpose, the current credit-oriented model of assessment which prioritises children's strengths and interests can raise tensions in relation to identifying children's needs. In Dunn's (2004) study, 500 learning stories were examined to identify how children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) could be supported through learning story assessment practices, in comparison to more traditional developmental or behavioural approaches. Findings showed significant difference in how SEN teachers and early childhood teachers approached assessment. SEN teachers focused on identifying needs and corrective assessment, while early childhood teachers focused on credit-based learning stories. SEN teachers criticised that the credit-based learning stories could be misleading for parents. These findings demonstrate pedagogical differences between two theories of learning. In a second New Zealand based study, Williamson, Cullen and Lepper (2006) explored how learning stories supported learning outcomes and assessment for two children with a high level of need. Learning stories enabled a combined and complementary assessment approach that narratively focused on skill and strength-based learning outcomes. They conclude positive outcomes through the inclusive and collective lens of parents, teachers and SEN practitioners. This demonstrates a slightly alternative perspective in terms of the scope of learning stories to address a child's needs as well as strengths.

With *Te Whāriki's* updated guidelines to assessment recently acknowledging the importance of identifying children's needs, the requirement for assessment to balance both strengths and needs presents a challenge and will require further research. Considerations about how teachers will use learning stories in ways that can sensitively document children's needs will need further reflection. Ultimately more research is needed about whether the learning stories purpose, still meets current assessment guidelines. The following section identifies some

of the critique learning stories has faced in recent years in relation to the challenges of

implementing learning stories.

2.1.3 Critique Related to Learning Stories

Though widely accepted and valued for their strengths, several authors have presented

discussions that question the dominance of a learning story approach to assessment. One author

to critique the established nature of learning stories is Ken Blaiklock (2008) who describes the

use of learning stories as problematic and questions their ability to provide rigour as an effective

assessment approach. In the original development work, Carr discussed four elements of

accountability that support learning story credibility, including ensuring transparency, gathering

multiple perspectives, refining the contextual constructs, and consideration of relationships

between the learner and the environment (Carr, 2001). However, Blaiklock's critique (2008)

disputes each of these categories. In terms of transparency, he identifies that the process of

interpretation occurs from the first step of describing and documenting a learning story and

therefore suggests that the aim of transparency and objectivity is difficult to establish. While

learning stories acknowledge and accept a more subjective approach to recording, Blaiklock

expresses concern that the potential result, may be one of judgement. The second category

relates to the gathering of multiple perspectives, which Blaiklock challenges in terms of

limitations related to time constraints and power relationships. He identifies that a lack of time

leads to limited opportunities for the genuine discussion of shared interpretations of learning, as

well as the reluctance of parents or teachers to have their say due to perceived hierarchies and

power relationships between teachers and parents. Blaiklock highlights the "slippery nature of

dispositions" (2008, p. 84). Definitions of the term disposition vary across sources, including

inconsistent categorisations of dispositions themselves. Therefore, describing and refining

dispositions and behaviours within each local context presents a challenge in terms of variation

which could compromise validity between early childhood centres. The final category of

accountability which considers relationships between the learner and the environment

summarises the socio-cultural theory and pedagogy. Blaiklock's concern here relates to the

practitioner's subjective process of deciding and planning based on learning that is relevant to

one specific experience and context, but which may not be relevant in another time or context.

Blaiklock (2008) called for an evaluation on the effectiveness of learning stories as an

assessment approach. Though not yet extensive, some recent studies, as discussed below, have

begun to offer some research-based evaluation.

   Perkins (2013) conducted a critical discourse analysis on the guiding books of learning

story implementation, *Kei Tua o te Pae*. Perkins' analyses of three of these documents found a

lack of discourse and explanation related to narrative assessment, the value of using photographs

and data gathering (Perkins, 2013). The author points out that each of these areas, which

presumably contribute to the quality of learning stories, are not sufficiently described for the

reader. It is suggested, that the reason behind this may be related to the expectations that by

2012, 100% of practitioners working within New Zealand settings would be ECE qualified in

line with the ten-year strategic plan, *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (Ministry of

Education, 2002). However, as this national goal was never completely fulfilled there is a gap in

the discourse and description of data-gathering processes within *Kei Tua o te Pae*, which

potentially presents limitations for the unqualified practitioner in terms of knowledge,

understanding and effective practices, within learning story assessment (Perkins, 2013). This

lack of guidance is also recognised within Blaiklock's (2008) discussion of learning stories,

where he suggests that the rationale and links between *Te Whāriki*'s strands and the learning dispositions and behaviours are unclear. Elements of the process are therefore potentially ambiguous and may have different interpretations to a variety of stakeholders.

Perkins (2013) criticises that *data gathering* appeared to be replaced with the term *noticing*, but which was not adequately defined. In Mawson's (2011) playcentre study of parent educators, findings showed that they lacked the professional knowledge of how to practice the method of notice, recognise and respond underpinned by *Kei Tua o te Pae*, as they had not received formal training in this guide to learning stories. Therefore only a few spoke of incorporating this strategy into their learning story writing and assessment practices. Interpretations not only between stakeholders, but also between individual practitioners vary, with further potential variance, related to level of experience, professional development and training. Similarly, Perkins in review of literature published by the ERO points out, that unqualified teachers display difficulty in accurately noticing and describing a child's learning when writing learning stories. Incorrect data gathering practices mean ineffective analysis and planning for further learning, and instead learning stories become documentation of "a one-off experience for a child" (Perkins, 2013, p. 77). Consequently, the importance of qualified practitioners and professional development to ensure the effectiveness of learning story assessment is highlighted.

In a New Zealand study of 24 practitioners, 11 managers, 13 teachers and 11 parents, Zhang (2016) conducted phenomenographic interviews and Education Review Office (ERO) report analyses across 11 ECE settings. The interviews sought to establish an in-depth understanding of the ECE experiences and perspectives of learning stories, alongside what is reported by the ERO. The findings showed themes of overlap between stakeholder perspectives

of learning stories, but it was clear that the priorities or emphasis given to these varied between each. For example, all noted a need for learning stories to include *parent-teacher communication*, teacher's required information from parents about learning at home and parents required information about learning from nursery, while "in comparison, parent involvement in the assessment of learning was rather narrowly defined by the ERO," referring simply to parent contributions through parent voice forms (Zhang, 2016, p. 9). This study contributes empirical research that supports Blaiklocks's concerns and further highlights the discord, in terms of how learning stories are interpreted, from the perspective of teacher, parent and ERO.

Finally, an important critique of the learning story approach is that it is so often used exclusively, and therefore valuable other approaches may be neglected, with an ensuing impact on teaching and learning for children. Blaiklock (2008) points out that a learning story approach to assessment could result in a lack of importance given to the achievement of knowledge and skills. While Zhang (2016) claims that due to a domination of learning stories in the New Zealand ECE context, there lacks expertise in any other form of assessment approach. He writes "regardless of the many strengths of the Learning Story methodology, Learning Stories alone are not adequate… early childhood education assessment should be carried out in a range of ways and should not rely on one single method" (Zhang, as cited in Zhang, 2016, p. 10). In other words, suggesting that learning stories when implemented as a sole approach to assessment are possibly missing important functions.

Learning stories when implemented effectively within a setting demonstrate several strength related outcomes, challenges inherent within the approach are acknowledged within the literature and associated critiques highlight that perhaps more research is needed that better

understands how they might be enhanced. The following section discusses recent research that has attempted to identify the quality features of learning stories in more detail.

2.1.4 Research Related to Enhancing Learning Stories

A recent project exploring teachers' perspectives of what constitutes quality learning stories is the work of McLaughlin et al., (2015) at Massey University. In a presentation at the 11th Early Childhood Convention the team shared findings from their research. The intended purpose was to articulate what matters to teachers when writing learning stories and to identify what teachers see as the important features of good learning stories. This study began with a systematic iterative review of the 42 peer reviewed journal articles that they had found that examined the learning story approach. Key themes revealed in the review related to the process, product and purpose of learning stories. Furthermore, they identified that there was limited guidance in the research literature on themes such as including multiple perspectives, making curriculum connections, and addressing the complexity and logistics of learning story writing, such as when and how many learning stories are recommended.

Following on from the systematic literature review, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 early childhood teachers, who taught children aged between three and five years. These teachers had ongoing and recent access to professional development related to learning stories. The interview data was analysed through inductive open coding and thematic analysis. The teachers were also required to select and bring an example of one high quality learning story, and one that needed improvement; based on the teacher's judgement. The findings from the literature review and the interviews were also examined through comparative analysis. This comparison between what the literature highlighted as important to a learning

story framework of assessment and what teachers identified, was at times inconsistent. While literature identified that a learning story should include multiple perspectives in the process of interpreting the learning, this practice was not reflected in the teachers' interview responses. Similarly, teachers did not discuss learning stories in terms of how they might inform or reflect teaching practices, neither did they mention their purpose as a means to share and revisit learning (McLaughlin et al., 2016, p. 20). This is concerning, given that earlier in the literature review above, these features were described as strengths of learning story assessment. There was also limited discussion from teachers regarding dispositions; making learning visible to child, teacher and parent; and supporting relationship building (McLaughlin et al., 2016). Ultimately, it is clear that there are some key quality features missing between what is described in the literature and what the teachers understand and potentially put into practice. A key reflection of this study was "when teachers do learning stories – they should take the time to do them well" (McLaughlin et al., 2015, p. 27). Recommendations included the development of a tool that can support learning stories in terms of quality, and the need for assessment methods that encompass a broad and balanced approach with an emphasis on quality.

In summary there appears to be a limited scope of research related to the quality features of learning stories. With continuing discussion and research highlighting current strengths and limitations of learning stories, there is a need for further study into the quality features of learning stories and what this means in terms of teachers' perceptions and practice. With growing international interest in learning stories as an assessment framework the need for research continues beyond New Zealand. The following section explores the descriptive studies related to learning story understanding, implementation and process in international early childhood contexts.

2.2 Learning Stories in an International Context

The emphasis on learning stories in New Zealand has had international influence. Despite contextual differences related to developmental theory, pedagogy and curriculum, the learning story framework for assessment has developed international interest, and in some cases has been a focus for further empirical research. This section of the literature review examines how learning stories are practiced and perceived internationally within different learning frameworks, and how the principles of assessment that they advocate support a learning story approach.

2.2.1 International Descriptive Studies

An overview of the literature shows that in several of the studies learning stories have been piloted or implemented in early childhood settings in an attempt to find solutions to limitations in current practices. In a Canadian study, a Kindergarten researcher introduced learning stories into her work setting over the period of a year, as an alternative method of assessment. The rationale was that "traditional assessment methods… did not necessarily capture the learning unfolding in the classroom" (Hope-Southcott, 2015, p. 34). In England, learning stories were piloted as a tool to support children's and parent's awareness of learner identity and disposition (Daniels, 2013). Similarly, learning stories were introduced to pre-service teachers in Australia and Saudi Arabia in the hope that this method would support teachers to be reflective and to ultimately benefit the quality of teaching and assessment practices (Nyland & Alfayez, 2012). In each of these contexts, learning stories are introduced as an alternative method to enhance or strengthen early childhood practices and assessment.

In Nyland and Alfayez's study (2012), qualitative interviews were conducted in both Australia and Saudi Arabia with lecturers and preservice teachers, to establish interpretations of the use and experiences of learning stories. Supporting reflective teaching practice was a key purpose for this research. Findings generally showed enthusiasm towards learning stories as a method of assessment in both countries. In Australia, the participants agreed that learning stories supported relationships between child, people and environment, but there were concerns related to the length of time they took and a practitioner's need for experience to write them. This was reflected in the findings from Saudi Arabia, which showed that pre-service teachers identified difficulties when analysing learning and deciding and writing about what could come next in terms of planning. Challenges related to the continuity of learning highlights challenges for teachers with limited experience, which may affect the achievement of *coverage* and *leverage* related to learning story authenticity discussed by Dunn (2004). Alternatively, in Canada, Hope-Southcott found in her year-long journey of learning story assessment approaches, that through this process she was pushed to reflect on the learner's thinking, how this connected with areas of the curriculum and "use of authentic documentation to make children's learning visible" (2015, p. 48). She commented on how the process enabled her to slow down, to show respect for a child's thinking and listen with intent. Her findings suggest that time was not a challenge, but instead influenced her practice in terms of slowing down, and that learning story documentation supported the authenticity of assessment.

In an Australian study, 29 kindergarten teachers were interviewed to explore their perspectives on the use of digital media within learning stories (Boardman, 2007). Findings showed that digital media was perceived to be a key feature in the assessment process and supported what the researcher described as *visible listening*. They believed that revisiting

documentation through the use of digital media, encouraged reflective thinking for children, and for teachers supported deeper reflective practices, about what the child was learning and professional approaches towards teaching. The use of photo and voice recorded documentation illuminated children's learning pathways and provided authentic evidence of knowledge and learning experiences that could later be shared with family. Reviewing the findings from these four qualitative studies suggest a common objective for researchers and practitioners in ECE in terms of the implementation of learning story assessment approaches and reflective practices.

In Hope-Southcott's Canadian research, learning stories were described as having the potential to capture complexity within learning (Hope-Southcott, 2015). The findings showed three key elements about the learning story method of assessment; they support an understanding of how children think; they engage parents; they support teacher reflection. Similar findings were also evident in Daniel's action research study which investigated three learning stories through descriptive case study. This research identified that observation allows for deeper understanding of children's learning, and opportunities for more complexity in terms of "social and intellectual skill" (2013, p. 312). Alternatively, learning stories are also criticised for being *random*, in that they "cannot ensure that the full complexity of a child learning is captured" (Knauf, 2018, p. 429). These opinions are at complete odds with each other and confirm the conflict of perspectives in terms of learning story effectiveness. In this same German ECE study, 338 learning stories from 32 ECE settings were examined and the findings showed variation in the frequency of dispositions recorded (Knauf, 2018). The disposition of *taking an interest* appeared in 296 out of 338 learning stories, while only 57 documented the disposition *taking responsibility*. These findings are similar to those recognised by Mawson (2011), which

highlight that learning stories may be dominated by the learning or behaviours that teachers give greater significance to.

Furthermore, Knauf (2018) found that 186 of the learning stories were written as a summative report, listing information about the child's learning. This suggests a lack of awareness about teacher's understanding and knowledge of the quality features of learning story practices, in relation to providing formative assessment that supports forward planning and documents learning over time. This ultimately means observation and long-term planning are at risk; but also, that learning stories practiced in this way do not appear to involve the child and parent in the process of assessment and miss the purpose of collecting multiple perspectives.

2.2.2 Related Research in the United Arab Emirates

The following section explores how assessment is approached in ECE in the UAE, its purpose and how it is perceived by practitioners. In the public kindergartens that serve the national children of the UAE, a study explored teacher's perceptions in relation to the effectiveness of assessment procedures (Al-Momani, Ihmeldeh & Momani, 2008). In this mixed methods research, questionnaires from 44 teachers were collected, followed by semi-structured interviews with seven of these participants. Kindergartens in the UAE follow the Ministry of Education curriculum, which in 2001 was reformed to give teachers more scope for independence within their teaching methods. The research sought to understand how this change was received by teachers and to determine how they had adapted their practice. Opinions varied with 43% of teachers preferring the previous curriculum which provided more instructional strategies of teaching, with a rationale that they felt children were capable of more academic

content knowledge. Teachers perceptions of assessment between the public and private sector are vastly different, as identified in the following UAE study.

In the kindergarten department of an international private school in the UAE, six teachers across six classrooms of 141 children, took part in a qualitative research study. This research looked at pedagogical documentation, which they describe as an innovative approach, as a possibility for formative assessment in the diverse, expatriate community of the UAE (Buldu, 2010). Their findings highlighted both success and challenge, many which overlap with learning story aims and purposes. In terms of positive findings, the teachers expressed that assessment through pedagogical documentation was "informative for instructional purposes; self-reflective; creates a professional learning community; and increases dialogue and communication with parents" (Buldu, 2010, p. 1444). Further, outcomes and characteristics described positive attributes which included the formative approach of describing and documenting learning, with an emphasis on the use of images.

In relation to benefits for the child, teachers identified that learning was supported with opportunities to revisit and reflect on learning, to collaborate and to develop self-awareness in the learning process, while benefits for parents included, becoming aware of how their child interacted within the process of learning, and having a platform to be able to exchange ideas with teachers. They also note that pedagogical documentation has the potential to support parent and teacher collaboration, teacher reflection and dialogue. These benefits are similar to reported benefits of the multiple perspectives and collective contributions inherent and intended within the learning stories approach. The concerns identified within the study related to time constraints, predicting that there would be difficulty in implementing this approach in relation to teacher resource and time. Also, they found challenges related to parent participation due to bus

transport systems and child carer pickups. These points are consistent with other studies, in which time and parent involvement are identified as a difficulty.

There is an evident lack of ECE research in the UAE. In the last ten years, only two studies relating to practices of assessment have been published. However, contextual similarities can be drawn from the research in Saudi Arabia identified in the previous section of this literature review. Nyland and Alfayez (2012) assert that the socio-cultural theorising and contextualisation which form the foundation for learning stories, have the potential to protect the awareness of historical concepts and Islamic beliefs within which the local culture is embedded. The same could be said for the culture and community of the UAE. However as identified above, knowledge and skill are just some of the cultural and contextual factors that would limit the quality of implementation of this assessment approach. Therefore, my research proposes to look at learning stories more than six years after it was first introduced to teachers in a Dubai based setting, identify how it is implemented and to explore teacher's perspectives of quality features within practices in the UAE.

2.3 Conclusion

Despite their wide-spread use, studies related to the learning story approach to assessment, both in New Zealand and internationally is limited, and there is a clear need for further research. Moreover, there is no clear evaluation standard for investigating learning stories as an assessment approach which makes it difficult to draw conclusive statements about their potential utility. The majority of research studies are small and specific to the setting in which the research took place, while this demonstrates the flexibility of the learning story approach for assessment within different contexts, it is difficult to generate a clear picture of effective or

quality learning stories. Nonetheless, key themes affirm the need for qualified and professional ECE teachers who engage in reflective dialogue, who look for ways to strengthen parent participation and who consider the authenticity of their assessment practice. Finally, in terms of international research, there are several questions related to how learning stories *fit* in contexts other than New Zealand; what the practices for implementation are; how they are perceived; and are there any similarities between the quality features of learning stories when implemented internationally as identified in New Zealand. These gaps in the literature support the focus in the present study, in exploring how learning stories are understood and implemented by early childhood teachers in the Dubai.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore teachers' perspectives related to learning story implementation and understanding. Building on the qualitative interview questions developed in New Zealand for exploring the quality features of learning stories (cf. McLaughlin et al., 2015), this study seeks to contribute to research about learning stories by exploring the perspectives of teachers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Establishing what learning stories *mean* and how they are understood and implemented by ECE teachers in a Dubai based setting will provide valuable international research that extends current research in New Zealand and offers an international comparision. While the research conducted by McLaughlin and colleagues in New Zealand endeavoured to explore quality features identified within the learning stories, the present research widens the scope further to consider teacher's experiences of implementing a learning stories approach in their specific context, as well as their beliefs about quality features. To this end, qualitative research utilising a case study design and in-depth interview methods was used to explore teacher perspectives, constructions and understandings. The qualitative interview technique was used to develop 'thick description' of meaning and context (Punch & Oancea, 2014, p. 210) from an international setting and hopes to enable comparisons with current research from New Zealand.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

Qualitative research intends to answer questions that explore and seek understanding (Punch & Oancea, 2014). In this unique Dubai context where learning stories are practiced by

early childhood teachers from around the world, it is possible that this assessment method may be approached very differently based on past experiences and knowledge. O'Donoghue describes *interpretivism* as research that "concentrates on the meanings people bring to situations and behaviour, and which they use to understand their world" (cited in Punch & Oancea, 2014, p. 18). As such, an interpretivist research approach is appropriate for the present research and will allow the researcher to explore teachers' different understandings. In a context that is culturally diverse, embedded in differing social behaviours and educational characteristics than would be typical in New Zealand, teachers use of learning stories in Dubai may be altered from the meanings, understanding, and practices used in New Zealand. Cohen, Manion and Morrison explain that the central purpose of an interpretivist research paradigm is to "understand the subjective world of human experience" (2011, p. 20). The intention and purpose of this study aligns with the description and purpose of qualitative interpretivist research, as it seeks to understand learning stories, as experienced by teachers in Dubai.

Within an interpretivist paradigm the research design needed to allow the opportunity to gather qualitative data from participants with varying backgrounds and understandings of learning stories. For this reason, a single case study was chosen. Yin describes a case study as "an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (2014, p. 3). A case study design therefore, has the ability to develop a rich description of learning stories, from the setting in focus (the case), through to an in-depth investigation into the teachers' understandings and interpretations (the unit of analysis). A case study that includes teachers' perspectives and interpretations add value to the overall understanding and implementation of learning stories in Dubai, as it is the teacher's knowledge and constructs that ultimately shape

how they are practiced. The methods of data collection that best attend to the interpretivist

nature and research questions of the case study are described in the following section.

3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 Research Aim and Questions

The aim of this study is to understand how learning stories are understood and

implemented by early childhood teachers in the UAE. The research intends to extend on New

Zealand's current research and explore contextual differences, as it examines the quality features

of learning stories, from teachers' perspectives, in an international context. The study was

guided by three specific research questions.

- How are learning stories implemented by early childhood teachers in Dubai?

- What do early childhood teachers in Dubai know and believe about learning stories?

- What are perspectives of early childhood teachers in Dubai on the quality features of

  learning stories?

3.3.2 Sample

This research used convenience purposeful sampling. Given that learning stories are not

widely implemented in ECE settings around the UAE, identifying a research sample required a

general knowledge of the education sector and assessment methods in practice, within these

private settings. With a number of years working within the local ECE community, a purposive

approach to sampling allowed me to contact peers, co-workers and ex-colleagues for possible

leads for participation. Through these contacts a narrowed list of possible settings that

implemented a learning story method of assessment within their context emerged, of which one thus met the convenience criteria for this study.

Using a purposive sampling approach is an appropriate decision for small scale (Cohen et al., 2011) and case study research, which seeks to present rich data about a given case. Though findings cannot be widely generalised, depth of data is collected, and the research questions addressed. While the key objective is not to make comparisons, there will be some opportunity to highlight areas of similarity and difference between the UAE, New Zealand and other international ECE contexts, as will be identified later in the description of data analysis.

3.3.3 Participants and Setting

The early years setting selected for this research is one privately owned nursery in Dubai that implements a learning stories assessment approach. As the term commonly associated with early childhood settings in the UAE, the term nursery will be used to identify the setting in focus within this case study.   The nursery is managed by one nursery manager, with the owner also taking a key role in the day to day policies and procedures. Implementing the English EYFS curriculum, the nursery believes in a child-centred approach to teaching and learning.

Contact with the nursery was established through the owner, who was provided an Information Sheet regarding the research project (Appendix A). Following a review of the information, approval for the nursery's participation was provided and permission to contact the manager and teachers was given. Teachers were then approached by their manager and provided an Information Sheet, and Participant Consent Form (Appendix B). Of the 11 teachers who were approached, six agreed to participate and gave consent. The participants in this case were the teachers who all implement the learning story assessment practices within their classroom.

There are 11 nursery classes in the nursery setting with up to 20 children and one teacher, and one or more assistant teachers in each class, depending on the UAE Ministry of Education guidelines for teacher to child ratio. Teachers and assistant teachers are from varying multicultural backgrounds, with the majority of the team coming from the Philippines and qualified with Bachelor of Education in Elementary. While most of the teachers speak English as a second language, it is the primary language of instruction in the nurseries, therefore teachers must be fluent in spoken and written English. Learning stories are written in English and shared with parents and families through individual portfolio books.

3.4 Data Collection

3.4.1 Qualitative Interview

The instrument for data collection was individual, semi structured, in-depth interview (Punch & Oancea, 2014). This was the primary tool chosen as it provided the opportunity for participants to share rich descriptions of their experiences, meeting the interpretivist objectives of this qualitative case study. Given the room for variability within a learning stories approach to assessment, qualitative in-depth interview was best suited to capture the participants constructs and interpretations. The original interview schedule was developed by McLaughlin et al., (2015) in their New Zealand-based research that explored teachers' perspectives of the quality features of learning stories. The original interview protocol and instrument were adapted for the purpose of this study, to include ideas related to the process of implementation as well as questions to understand teachers' contextual background and experience, and the cultural context of using learning stories in the UAE. Questions related to quality features were still present within the interview schedule but were not as dominant as they were in the original research.

Choosing an instrument that is developed by previous researchers or experts is preferred (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2019), in terms of time and efficiency, as well as enhancing the reliability and validity of the data as the questions are already tried and tested. The interview schedule is attached as Appendix C.

The interview protocol provides a series of 10 questions, each with a set of potential probing questions. The probes, as suited to qualitative semi-structured interview, provide possible responses for the interviewer to ask depending on the participants original responses (Fraenkel et al., 2019) to elicit more specific detail or clarification. The interviews were conducted individually, in person. Interviews were pre-scheduled and allowed for up to an hour with each participant. Presentation, trust and rapport were important considerations for the interview (Punch & Oancea, 2014), particularly given the cultural setting. As the research is concerned with collecting rich and authentic data from the interview participants, it was necessary that they felt comfortable. All efforts to make them feel at ease were considered, such that the interviews took place in a quiet private space, at a time of their choice, and the interviewer did not make notes throughout the interview to avoid potential distraction. Instead, each interview was audio recorded and later transcribed. Furthermore, the questions and terminology used were familiar and therefore non-threatening.

As part of the case study, learning story artefacts were also utilised as part of the interview protocol. Participants were asked to bring examples of learning stories with them to the interview; one learning story an example that the participant believed to be of high quality, while the other one that they felt was of lower quality or needed work. These acted as a tool to elicit a response from the teachers in their discussion of learning stories, and was the method also used by McLaughlin et al., (2016) in their research of teachers in New Zealand. In the present

study the participants were asked to discuss elements from their favourite learning story example. This technique supported the interview and thus data collection, in terms of developing a more in-depth understanding of teachers' perspectives of the quality features of learning story implementation in the UAE.

3.5 Ethics

When developing qualitative educational research, Cohen et al., state that researchers should, "regard it as shot through with actual and potential sensitivities" (2011, p. 177). In a unique and multicultural city such as Dubai this is certainly the case, and therefore two codes of conduct were used to guide ethics within this research. The *Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations Involving Human Participants* (Massey University, 2017) provided the guidelines relevant to research overseen by Massey University, while the *Professional Code of Conduct,* (Abu Dhabi Education Council, 2014) a policy for educators in the capital of the UAE, provided a set of standards relevant to the context and culture specific to this region.

Identified within the *Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations Involving Human Participants*, are four obligations and principles for New Zealand Māori-centred research; relationships; purposefulness; cultural and social responsibility; and justice and equity (Massey University, 2017, p. 8). These serve as relevant reminders for research situated in this context and are mirrored in the UAE's code of conduct set within their policy standards; relationships; communication; local culture; tolerance for diversity; and sensitivity (Abu Dhabi Education Council, 2014). This list is not the complete set of 12 standards but summarises the key points that overlap with Massey Universities Code of Ethics

obligations. Further these obligations uphold the three principles implicit within the Treaty of

Waitangi, *partnership*, *participation* and *protection* (Massey University, 2017) and also serve as

important considerations throughout the research. There are similarities between New Zealand

and UAE research contexts, given the embedded cultural values significant to both. As such it

was important to be mindful of how partnerships and relationships were approached throughout

the study, the importance of the voluntary nature of participation and the protection of

participants through harm mitigation and sensitive approaches.

A low risk application form was submitted and approved by the Massey University

Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC) and is attached as Appendix D. Thesis supervisors were

consulted at all stages of the research design and leading up to the ethics submission, regarding

any possible concerns. A concern related to potential power relationships between researcher

and participant was raised and discussed with supervisors. This discussion explored the ethics of

the researcher interviewing teacher participants with whom previous working connections had

previously existed. Ultimately this scenario was deemed to still fit within low risk application

guidelines as no present relationships were influenced by employment hierarchy or role. To this

end, participants were given an Information Sheet (Appendix A) to provide all details of the

study and a Participant Consent Form (Appendix B). These outlined that participation would be

voluntary and withdrawal from the study was possible at any stage throughout the investigation.

It also indicated the potential risk of participation, but explained that names and identifiable

features, related to the participant or nursery would not be used, in order to protect

confidentiality. Further while participants employed in the nursery all have English as a second

language they are required to have an excellent command of the English language; keeping this

in mind the forms attempted to be clear and straight forward. The participants had the option to

take these forms away, to read and complete them in their own time, to ensure they did not feel hurried or pressured to give consent.

Finally, this study notes that a researcher's personal values and interpretations from an ethics perspective potentially affect research (Punch & Oancea, 2014). Therefore, it is important to maintain awareness of how personal interactions with participants may impact relationships and ultimately data. As such participants were given the opportunity to review transcript data and to clarify any desired point. Dual experience in ECE in both New Zealand and UAE has supported the cultural focus of the study and allowed for insider knowledge in developing tools and analysing data. This position has played an important role in all aspects of this study and through a constant process of reflection, aims to support research ethics and transparency.

3.6 Data Analysis

This study sought to highlight teacher interpretations of learning story assessment methods and offer rich qualitative descriptions of participant responses, highlighting emergent themes. Analysis was inductive, which enabled a 'bottom up' approach for the interpretation of data. Miles and Huberman (1994) describe a three-stage interactive model of data analysis that includes data reduction, data display and data conclusion drawing. This model supported a systematic and thorough approach towards data analysis within this study. Also, given the exploratory nature of the research, it was important to maintain an iterative process that moved fluidly back and forward between stages of coding, refining and deciding on content to display in the form of matrices, as participant themes emerged.

In terms of data reduction, this study employed two methods of inductive coding for data analysis; *first level coding*; and *pattern coding* (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interviews were

transcribed, and coding was developed inductively, by hand, through a coding scheme that identified general domains highlighted within the data. The first level coding involved the process of writing short summarising sentences alongside the transcribed data, and in a second column more concise descriptions were developed alongside the short sentences which began to highlight key information within the data. Developing the data in this way enabled a consolidation of the extensive transcribed notes, and also developed an initial overall summary of the data. The following step of pattern coding facilitated the identification of themes, context and emerging category domains. Miles and Huberman described the function of pattern coding as supporting the researcher to "elaborate a cognitive map, an evolving, more integrated schema for understanding local incidents and interactions" (1994, p. 67). The pattern coding was grouped and ordered together, and an associated code description was developed. These descriptions were then analysed in detail, drawing conclusions from the data matrices and participant quotes from which 12 key themes were identified.

As explained earlier the objective of this case study is not to present comparisons between the participants perspectives. Through the processes of thematic analysis, patterns of individual meaning and story emerged from within the transcripts, and while the findings explain common threads that run through their narratives, the emphasis is not a comparative one. Rather the focus of data conclusion was to illuminate participants' understandings of quality features of learning stories reporting what is important to them, and the manner in which they are practiced in their unique context in Dubai. Presented as themes within a case story, the findings are intended to honour the participants individual perspectives of learning stories, and at the same time highlighted collective views of teachers in the UAE related to learning story implementation.

3.7 Credibility and Validity

The intent for this case study was to build on McLaughlin's et al., (2015) original study of the quality features of learning stories and extend these findings through the addition of an international perspective. Developing this study in alignment with the purpose and intent of the original research and adapting it for the UAE early years context, supports the credibility and authenticity of this research. The present study therefore uses the previous research as a foundation for developing an authentic research design, which will generate findings that are trustworthy and relevant to this context.

As earlier stated, the literature review and data collection attempts to develop thick description of learning stories, the local early years context and the participant setting. The strength of the present study in terms of credibility is in the use of participant voice, the rich data descriptions that highlight their interpretations related to what learning stories mean to them (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Furthermore, credibility is established by checking on the meanings related to participants responses within the interview when perhaps their meaning was unclear and also through the use of common vocabulary that was familiar to participants. All interviews were recorded for later transcription and participants were invited to check and clarify their transcripts if needed. Also, as previously noted, regular meetings with supervisors provided a platform for discussion ruling out risks such as researcher bias and power relationships that might impact on the overall validity of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Chapter 4: Results

4.1 Introduction

Six participants from one nursery setting in the United Arab Emirates were interviewed in order to understand teacher's approaches to implementation of learning stories and perspectives on the quality features in this unique context. Their interviews were transcribed and then analysed through an open coding technique for data reduction. Summarising sentences were developed alongside the transcribed narratives, then reduced further through second level coding with a category description. These descriptions were assigned a pattern code, which highlighted emerging context and themes.

The chapter begins in narratively reporting data that describes the assessment practices and processes of the setting. Contextual information will highlight how learning stories were introduced into this setting, how they are being used, and how they are supported through professional development. This will lead into the key themes identified within the teacher interviews.

4.2 Learning Stories in the Current Context

The nursery is a privately owned setting in Dubai, licensed for more than 200 children, most of whom are expatriates from around the word, representing more than 30 countries. There are 11 coordinating teachers within the nursery who each lead in one of the 11 classrooms. The nursery has been using learning stories for more than six years and all teachers are experienced with the model. All participants within the study experienced learning stories for the first time within the present setting. At the time of interview, they each had between three

and six years' experience of learning story practice and implementation. The manner of introduction to this method of assessment varied between participants. Some described that an introduction to learning stories and subsequent training came from the setting manager, or the head teacher, while others described limited support in relation to initial training or ongoing professional development. Participants also noted that learning stories are the setting's sole assessment approach and that teachers were required to write one story per child per term, in other words once in each three month period.

Findings suggested that participating teachers use of learning stories in this setting has changed and progressed over time. They identified how approaches to learning stories have improved and shared personal reflections of learning which they believed had influenced the quality of their learning stories. Participants commented on improved practices in terms of identifying and observing learning stories and writing learning stories that have a greater impact.

4.2.1 Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Practitioners described access to training and a culture of professional development within the nursery, which at times includes training related to learning stories. Most learning story related training is provided by senior management, but also with support from colleagues and peers, associated settings, and head teachers.

All participants over time had training and CPD related to learning stories and commented that they would seek further training and CPD if it was available. Hours of training received by the participants all consistently suggested several hours accumulated over time. The content of these workshops included content related to photography, and capturing, writing and enhancing learning stories. Some participants identified the benefits of looking through other

practitioners' stories and one participant commented that she would appreciate learning story sharing between peers to support her own practice improvement. When asked in what areas they would seek more training, the replies vary. Their answers included, writing, age specific learning stories, observation and assessment, alternative ways of capturing stories and building continuity between stories.

4.2.2 The Method of Documentation and Assessment

The method of learning story documentation identified across all participant interviews described a similar process, including the approaches taken towards the collection of observations. The learning deemed worthy content for a learning story varied between participants. Some described observations and anecdotes that began with child-initiated play, or at times observations were described as wow moments; an unexpected story captured that illustrates a *"spark of interest"* [P4] or a unique experience of play that the teacher chooses to identify and document. Another participant described wow moments with less value, simply seen, captured and documented. Instead she placed more importance on a learning story where *"you really observe,"* plan and do the next step [P5].

The teachers initially record learning stories anecdotally, and referred to these as post-its, anecdotals, sticky notes, or a narrative jotted down. While they had different names, the process is described the same. These are later developed more fully and recorded as a learning story, which includes a narrative story of the child, with links made to the curriculum and ideas for enhanced learning opportunities. The learning story sometimes includes examples of child voice, but always includes evidence in the form of photos. In addition to the use of photos, half of the participants also regularly include video documentation, which are copied onto CD and

shared with the parents. Stories are collected as single individual learning stories or collective

group (multi-child) learning stories depending on the context of the observation. Participants

discussed examples of both group and individually written learning stories, with no evident

preference of one form over another. It is also noted that the setting guidelines require that only

one story be collected per child per term and that learning stories is the setting's sole approach to

assessment.

The above descriptions frame the context of learning stories as they were introduced and

are now practiced within the setting. Analysis of the findings are now outlined in further detail

within a framework of twelve overarching themes that address the research questions that guided

this study. These are identified below, supported by illustrative quotes from participants which

exemplify each theme.

4.3 Key Themes Identified Within the Case Study

4.3.1 Learning Stories Involve Teacher Facilitation

The way in which teachers facilitate children's learning is a key aspect of practice and

plays a large role in the description of the learning story captured. It was noted that teachers

often wrote learning stories based on learning that they had facilitated. In some cases, the

teacher identified a learning moment which they then encouraged or directed through the

provision of other resources or activities to extend learning opportunities, while in other

examples the learning story described a moment that was teacher directed from the beginning.

Several of the sample learning stories that the participants selected to bring to the interview they

described as beginning with child initiated play, interest-based learning experiences. For

example, one practitioner discussed her actions taken to support the child-led observation of play

in the moment, which she facilitated further the same afternoon and continued over several consecutive days.

So, it started when we [teacher and facilitator] were just observing the children and how they were playing… So, children are just talking about the wagon and then started playing altogether and started having a discussion about it... And then we started adapting and trying to add more input. So, we sang wheels on the bus and then the children started to build the concept that they can be a wagon and everything and they started doing the actions… So, [that afternoon] we had another discussion with the group [of children] and then we asked them about simple machines so they started identifying the different parts of the cars and the different parts of the things that can move around, so the simple machines. The children started engaging and using the other things and equipment outside. [P1]

Another participant shared a learning story which she described as starting with child-initiated play, which then lead to a teacher facilitated follow on activity the following day that became a wow-moment.

It was going to be a Halloween celebration and there was one chap who brought a pumpkin on that day as a part of the costume... And he started looking at it… [with an]other child… and they were in the small group area and they were using magnifying glasses… And from then on, we asked some parents to bring more [pumpkins] for the next day… And with my observation notes, it was a wow moment for that child. [P4]

Several examples of learning stories discussed by participants began with teacher planned and directed activities. One teacher discussed her method of role-modelled play with resources and materials to invite child interest, *"my learning style is I role model it today… And if I see tomorrow somebody doing it, probably that will be a learning story"* [P3], while another identified table-top activities planned and prepared by teachers, through to planned experiences and environments *"but of course as a facilitator we have to enable an environment where they can learn more"* [P5]. Some participants identified these types of learning stories as their example of a learning story requiring more work, for the reason that they were teacher directed learning story experiences and not child-led. *"It is like only an activity that I just introduced… this one is only like a table top activity"* [P1]. The participant's description of this learning story was less valued, her preferred learning story related to the wagon play child initiated learning experiences described above.

Participants identified learning and began the process of capturing a learning story by recording an anecdotal observation or wow moment, either through child-led play or teacher directed activities. This was often described as the starting point of a learning story which was followed by teacher facilitation and provision from planned activities through to an enhanced learning environment and became an important feature in the documentation of the narrative. In summary, learning stories discussed tended to be stories documenting a child's interests or experiences, centred around teacher facilitation and direction.

4.3.2 Learning Stories Highlight Strengths, Interests, and Needs

Another key theme identified is how learning stories serve as a means to identify a child's interests, strengths, and needs. Half of the participants explained the potential of a

learning stories approach to identify and connect with a child's individual interests. One participant stated, *"you observe the children and when you really come to know their interest… you will facilitate them 100%"* [P5]. Similarly, another participant commented *"that's also about knowing the children's interests and where to go from there"* [P4]. Teachers explained that a child's interests which are identified through learning story observation, are connected to facilitated learning experiences.

Half of the participants highlighted through their discussion a learning story's potential to capture a child's achievement based upon pre-identified needs. In a learning story example discussed by one practitioner, she begins by explaining a physical area of development in which a child needs support. With the teacher's reflection and attention, the child ultimately achieves the desired learning objective and this event is documented and celebrated through learning story.

> *He was really trying for two days to climb on that climbing frame… I was*
>
> *thinking that I really need to scaffold him… So, this day again we were really*
>
> *focusing on their physical development… I asked my teachers to encourage him.*
>
> [P5]

In a similar scenario offered by another participant, a child needing support in an area of development is observed spontaneously displaying the desired outcome or target, which is then the impetus for recording through a learning story.

> *I have this child in the classroom who is like nine months old and yet learning to*
>
> *crawl… we wanted to do something to help her crawl and learn that she needs to*
>
> *move around… it was a surprise that suddenly one day she discovered and she*

crawled… and that was like a wow moment for me because all that work was

finally successful. [P2]

Many of the teachers at some point in their interview explained child assessment in terms of needs or weaknesses, delayed milestones or barriers for learning. One participant in her explanation of learning stories, explained that through this approach to assessment, she is able to *"cover all the areas that they [the child] are lacking through that interest"* [P4]. Therefore, through learning story assessment practices the teacher is able to identify a child's interests and then support learning where needed. On the other hand, a participant noted that a benefit of the learning stories approach to assessment is that it has the ability to highlight where a child is needing support, *"benefits for, first for the child… We can always see the supports, what the child needs"* [P6]. Learning stories are therefore described as having the ability to support both a child's strengths, interests and needs. Practitioners reported facilitating experiences for children that connected to previously observed interests and that were also intended to support children's developmental needs.

4.3.3 Next Steps and Follow-Up Learning Stories Seldom Documented

Though teacher facilitated experiences dominated the learning stories shared by the teachers, the participants reported difficulty in relation to preparing suggested next steps or documenting follow-up learning stories. One participant stated, *"we are having an issue of following it up because… the children start to lose interest in it or we started doing some other things and we didn't get back to that learning story"* [P1]. Two practitioners seemed unsure of how to follow-up with another learning story and suggested this is an area that they would seek

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further CPD, *"but only the follow-up... Yeah, I would say I am learning that"* [P4]. Furthermore, some participants discussed the difficulty of following up on learning stories, noting reasons such as deadlines, stories forgotten, or simply that the story is not explored any further after it is documented.

> *There are times that okay, this child immediately I can do the next step for them, but there are also learning stories which sometimes I cannot go onto the next level. Instead of going to the next level, I am recording another learning story for a particular child and I think that is the main challenge.* [P6]

One practitioner explained that she had never followed up her learning story's next step suggestions.

> *I never did that frankly telling but I would love to do it [follow-up story]. And it would be like one step more… but the thing is that now we are writing only one… and then you forget… and when they [management] ask… when are you doing this… we are lost, we don't open this and we don't see this... But if it is continuation, then it is an ongoing thing and then obviously we can do it. But this, obviously we are doing once in a term and I am not able to do that.* [P3]

Though all participants described a number of challenges related to following-up on learning stories, the practice was still valued. One participant reported that she valued follow-up learning stories very highly, and regularly focused her documentation around the follow-up learning story experiences; *"this kind of learning story where you really observe and you are planning something and you are doing something – the next step."* [P5]

Several contributing factors, including the restricted number of learning stories per child per term, and possible lack of time, result in a lack of follow-up or forward planning and enhanced learning opportunities of individual stories. Therefore, there seems to be limited examples where learning is followed-up in practice or recorded through continuing documentation.

4.3.4 Children's Engagement and Involvement Idealistic and Intermittent

The importance of child participation in learning stories was recognised by most of the practitioners, but not consistently exemplified in their practice or the sample learning stories shared. Some of the participants identified implementation processes in the nursery that included child involvement through various stages such as observation, collection, documentation, sharing and celebration. However, the teacher's responses that related to child engagement were inconsistent and at times appeared to be idealistic, in other words it was briefly touched on in discussion but did not appear to be embedded in their practices and sample learning stories.

Two participants described a classroom practice where learning stories were shared at circle time. One noted;

normally, what we do here is we read it [the learning story] to the child; what they did and what they achieved. During circle time or something like that or we would make a video so the child can see okay wow, I achieved this much. [P3]

Another participant explained, *"we will have a circle time and we will get all these learning stories and then they [the children] will try to recall"* [P1]. A third participant

described *"putting this learning story in our reading corner and the big children, they truly can see their progress over there and they celebrate it."* [P5]

Half of the participants identified some importance of including the child's voice in the collection of the story. However, only one participant described how they captured this in the learning story example explaining that, *"So, I noted down some of the points… and what they [the child] say exactly"* [P5], and then made clear in the learning story that it was direct speech from the child, through the use of quotation marks.

While child involvement is recognised as being important to the process of learning story implementation, it does not appear to be consistently embedded in practice. Interview data suggested that teachers reported what could or should happen in including child's voice in learning stories and making learning stories available to read or revisit, but the process of child involvement was largely managed by the teacher at scheduled periods during the day.

4.3.5 Parents Peripheral in the Learning Stories Approach

Data suggested that parent involvement in learning story implementation was minimal. Rather than actively participating in the assessment process, parents are more likely identified by participants as recipients or spectators of child assessment. When asked to describe the benefits of learning stories, the participants described parents' perspectives towards receiving their child's learning story in terms of appreciative emotional responses such as happiness, pride and satisfaction. One practitioner commented that parents tended to focus on the photos rather than the story, *"every time that we have a parent involvement, then okay this is your timing to check your child's learning story, they focus more on the pictures"* [P6]. As a result, the setting had decided to adjust their approach of capturing visual evidence and to capture video as well as

photos. These videos were saved onto CD and added to their child's portfolio along with the learning story. Another participant noted the parents' perspective as, *"I think they just read it and they just find it cute."* [P4]

Parent participation was generally not discussed in depth by the individuals during interview, though each of the participants identified experiences where learning stories were shared with parents in different ways. The moment of learning appeared to be shared immediately and verbally with parents on the day of the event, and then shaped into a written learning story that was then shared with parents at a later time. Two participants explained that the nursery had a scheduled event for parents once a term, during which time they were invited to meet with teachers and look at their child's learning stories;

> *In two months we are having enough time to collect all the… information and we will write it down and print it out and put it in the folder and then in the third month of the term we will ask them [parents] to come and have a read through.* [P5]

Many of the participants commented that learning stories served a role in identifying areas where parents could support their child's learning at home, although there was not necessarily confidence that this would be acted upon by parents, as one participant stated, *"based on my experience, I don't have one parent that has taken it to the next level"* [P4]. Two teachers further expressed that parents were disengaged from this process and did not recognise learning stories as a teaching opportunity to be continued at home.

As identified above, parent participation within the learning stories process appears to be peripheral. Opportunities to be involved or give feedback related to their child's development is

minimal and therefore their role is seen by practitioners mostly as recipient rather than partner in assessment.

4.3.6 Creating a Fit Between Learning Stories and the Curriculum

All participants described a process whereby they actively sought to *fit* the content of a learning story to reflect the formal curriculum, being the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The teachers valued the flexible nature of learning stories and the versatile manner in which this approach to assessment was able to fit with existing nursery practices as well as the framework of the guiding curriculum; *"learning stories was not part of the EYFS… But we love making them part of our nursery"* [P2]. One participant explained how the nursery approach, curriculum and nursery goals and vision interconnect, with the child at the centre and highlighted the role learning stories plays within the pedagogical approach of the setting.

> *It is all about the child and they are at the centre of everything. So, the learning*
>
> *story goes with that itself, because the learning story is all about the child's*
>
> *learning on a certain moment on a certain event. So, as a whole it interconnects*
>
> *to each other, from the curriculum, from the approach, from how we implement*
>
> *the visions and the goals of the nursery itself.* [P6]

One practitioner identified that sometimes there is a difficulty with connecting a learning stories approach with the EYFS, but acknowledged that while there are different purposes the setting uses them side by side in a complementary way.

> *It [EYFS] has good points and bad points… for some parts of the curriculum it is*
>
> *not meeting the particular points that you are expecting them to meet… But the*

good point is that it [curriculum] is like a baseline for us… So, it is a good

reference… we are always checking on it [curriculum] and how we can enhance

the learning story. [P1]

Participant's noted that a child's learning story is typically summarised or categorised in terms of the EYFS areas of learning and objectives, in highlighting the learning that is taking place, as well as the child's current stage of development. As one teacher noted *"the wow moment… for me, I look into the areas of learning [of the curriculum] and where it fits to and then write"* [P4]. Similarly, another participant explained;

> *…if we will assess it [observation] and bring it to the curriculum itself, you will*
>
> *see it is actually there. By this age, this child should be achieving… we can see*
>
> *or we can observe by this age because they are already achieving stages. So, we*
>
> *can always compare it and support them as well.* [P6]

Another participant described the fit between learning story and the EYFS as a celebration of the unique child, which is the first theme of the EYFS curriculum. Her explanation suggests a balance between measuring and monitoring achievement of learning outcomes from the curriculum and learning stories which picks select learning and highlights this as part of celebrating the unique child.

> *Very well now, because the curriculum is all about the early years foundation stage, the*
>
> *education of the children, celebrating the unique child, so, it is a celebration. So, when*
>
> *we observe and we will see and we will capture the moment in the video and with the*
>
> *pictures.* [P5]

There is an overall consensus that teachers value the way in which learning stories and EYFS constructively fit together to share children's learning moments. This affirmation seems to reflect teachers' perceptions that learning stories are flexible in nature and can be interpreted in such a way that they can be aligned to the curriculum in practice. There also appears to be some consistency of views related to the balance learning stories bring to assessment, in that the narratives capture the holistic nature of development and learning while the EYFS serves as a framework with which to cross check achievement of specified outcomes.

4.3.7 Documentation and Evidence a Primary Purpose of Learning Stories

Participant responses suggested that they viewed the overall purpose of learning stories in relation to the documentation of teaching and learning. Such documentation was seen to provide evidence of children's progress and learning for parents, or the Ministry of Education, as well as capturing moments of child happiness, nursery celebrations, and connections to the curriculum framework. Two participants noted a connection between how learning stories supported or provided evidence of learning for external professionals in the community, such as external specialists or government entities. One participant identified that learning stories provide evidence for specialists (for children with special needs), and in terms of accountability as *"one of the documents which they can show as well to the Ministry of Education when they come… it is a document that shows we are doing the best practice."* [P6]

Practitioners perspectives related to whether learning stories were achieving this underlying purpose varied. One practitioner stated, *"It is what we do, it's us… you can just show everything that you are doing in this LS"* [P3]. She believed that learning stories were achieving

their purpose as a representation and evidence of the nursery's practices. However, another practitioner believed that learning stories were not achieving her views on purpose, which related to a shared partnership and evidence for parents, because of a lack of follow through by parents at home. The same practitioner believed that if learning stories were done correctly by the teacher, then they could potentially establish and document the child's interests. *"There is a lot of proof from there… with the learning story, if we've really done how it should be, we go into their interests"* [P4]. This participant therefore seemed conflicted in opinion in terms of purpose, on one hand she appeared to value learning stories for their potential to capture a child's interests, but at the same time expressed concern that learning stories were not meeting their underlying purpose of connecting with parents to share learning.

Collectively the participants each discuss the potential strengths of learning stories to record child progress, memories and development and serve as proof of learning. While evidence and documentation is identified as a key purpose, there appears to be concern from some of the participants that the goals for purpose are not always achievable for one reason or another.

4.3.8 Learning Stories Support Reflective Practices

Every participant noted the value of learning stories in supporting reflective teaching practices. Even during the interview, when sharing a chosen learning story, one teacher paused to reflect on how she might in hindsight have responded differently with the child in the moment commenting that *"I think when I am checking it again, it wasn't enough for him to do. Maybe I can add a bit more during that time"* [P1]. Further examples of learning stories supporting reflection included discussion of how teachers are able to see outcomes through the

documentation of learning stories, as well as critically thinking about what was working or not working, and identifying strengths or concerns in relation to practice. One teacher commented, *"that is the way of my teaching and observing and planning something and I always see the outcomes and I always learn from my mistakes"* [P5]. Another noted;

> *it is actually a way of how we can reflect back of how things are being done… an assessment for us… to find out what learning we did. How, as an early educator, we were able to enhance and help the child go further and achieve the milestone.* [P2]

Two teachers identified that learning stories supported reflection on the practices of the setting and provisions within the environment, helping them to identify strengths and challenges in the wider programme, *"you will sit with your learning story and do reflection and you want to know what kind of… negative things and the positive things – so that you can enhance it"* [P5]. The capacity of learning stories to elicit reflective practices are regularly highlighted by participants, and affirm the value placed by teachers on regular professional thought and discussion which aim to enhance the learning experiences, setting and provisions.

4.3.9 Teacher Collaboration and Communication About Learning Stories, Top-Down and Informal

Participants reported that team collaboration is regularly incorporated into the implementation of learning stories within the setting; from mentoring in learning story practices; shared experiences between a learning story event; or collaboration over teacher-planned provisions. The teachers also reported that they engaged in team discussions to move learning story practices forward in the nursery setting.

Participants described day-to-day accounts of peer collaboration including discussions that arise during the learning story event related to potential opportunities to enhance learning experiences for the group or individual child in the moment. Peer collaboration also occurred later as teachers shared and discussed the observation informally as a group to jointly identify whether learning was suitable for documentation as a learning story, and to identify possibilities for future teaching and learning, *"what we do is most of the time is that we are all together sitting down… and [we] jot down the things and stick it on the wall"* [P2]. Another stated, "*After that… [I] hold a brainstorming with my team. So, all of the teachers are well aware that this child had developed this certain learning"* [P6]. One teacher commented that in their class she as the head teacher decides how the learning story can be supported through planned experiences, and then shares this with the team of assistant teachers. *"I shared it with the other facilitators that I had seen this and I showed them pictures… shared it with them, the plan of the next bit… No questions asked, let's just do this"* [P4]. Similarly, in another class the assistant teacher sought advice from the head teacher during the event for ideas how best to support the learning, commenting that *"she [the assistant teacher] was actually the facilitator in it and she tried asking for some advice on what to do and how to help the children engage and communicate more."* [P1]

Experiences related to teacher communication were frequently discussed by participants, but these collaborative practices are inconsistent. Most are described as informal encounters, during which time knowledge or recommendations related to the individual observation or possible next steps are passed along from the more experienced or senior practitioner, in a top-down approach.

4.3.10 Conditions Within the Setting Can Have Negative Effects on the Quality of Learning

Stories

Half of the participants identified that that challenges related to conditions in the work

setting effected their ability to enact quality features of learning story collection and

documentation, including deadlines and a busy schedule of events within the setting. Other

participants further identified challenges such as interrupted non-contact time and commented on

the difficulty in finding time to write so many learning stories.

> *Sometimes it so happens… like every week we have one or the other event. So, we cannot*
>
> *sit down to sit down and write the stories, but we have our concepts. So as soon as Ms*
>
> *XX is going to tell us the deadline, we will start filling the learning stories.* [P2]

Several conditions are described as interfering with the quality of learning stories as they

pose a challenge to the process of collection and writing. The participants appear to be under

pressure in terms of time and the authenticity of learning stories may therefore be effected in the

process. One participant identified that the impact of such pressures had even led to the

fabrication of learning stories.

> *So, we just write when we see a photo, when we are browsing the photos, and we*
>
> *see this and we make up things just to have it… For example, we try to remember*
>
> *things that we are unsure of. And, we really write good ones, like what*
>
> *happened… to be honest… but if we are out of time and we really need to give the*
>
> *learning story and we need to display them, then we look for photos and we just*
>
> *look – oh, this morning he was riding a bicycle. Maybe it was his first time to*

push the pedals which you are unsure of. I am going to be honest, I have done

that. [P4]

4.3.11 Learning Stories Should be Accurate, Objective and Support Future Planning

All participants referred to the potential for learning story assessments to support children's developmental progress. Participants identified that the process of collecting and writing learning stories provided them with knowledge of the child, milestones achieved, and their story of learning over time, and that such information provided an opportunity to then further support a child's individual learning and progress. One participant stated that *"these [learning stories] are very good way for us to show them [parents] that this is how she was when she was in the beginning and this is how her progress has happened"* [P2], while another commented,

> *…anytime a practitioner needs authentic proof or evidence that the child has really developed this… is one of the lenses that I can show to parents or to my team or to anyone who wants proof that the child may have reached those levels.* [P6]

She also notes about the process of learning story assessment, *"So, it has an impact. At this moment, she is one of the leaders who will just stand and lead the class… So, meaning there is an impact from the assessment itself, going to this level."* [P6]

In terms of observation, participants believed that learning stories should capture the events as they happen, with authenticity being a priority. Participants explained that they aimed for learning stories that were accurate in their description of the child's play and objective in

nature; *"it should be completely what you see is what you write... so it is more an objective thing... it is not really about the subjective type of writing, but an objective way of doing it"* [P1]. Yet, at the same time the majority of participants identified challenges to enacting such beliefs, including inaccuracy or subjectivity in the observation process, difficulty with capturing and writing a learning story, or how to include child's voice in the story. One participant highlighted the importance of *"not just taking pictures for the sake of writing the story, but actually capturing the moment and then writing the story"* [P2]. There is a connection between the participants discussions that tended to suggest difficulties in authenticity in earlier times of learning story documentation within the setting. One participant stated, *"but when you actually start writing and have actually witnessed it, you can exactly write. Before – kind of – I was faking, I would say. Just to finish my task. But now I cannot"* [P3]. Therefore, while participants strive for accuracy and objectivity in learning stories, some do refer to times when personally challenged with achieving these authentic observations goals.

Participants were asked to identify features that they believed reflected quality practices of learning stories. Responses indicated that including a next step, the use of video recordings, and a child's voice were some of the main valued features. Two teachers specifically mentioned that documentation through video would better support the evidence and quality of a learning story. For another participant, the use of the child's voice documented within a story was a key quality indicator. Beyond the documentation method used, half of the participants believed that quality is determined by the manner and extent in which the child's ideas are explored in the story, and how well next steps and ideas for planning are incorporated into the story. One teacher suggested that the potential of a learning story would be improved if the story and next steps were better connected in practice, *"if it is an ongoing thing it will surely help us to write*

70

it… in a better way and then there will be a connection [of the next step] which I think it is not there." [P3]

The participants clearly valued a learning story approach to assessment, and were able to articulate the way in which it supported teaching and learning, and fostered child development through teacher planned activities. They appeared to have developed shared perspectives within their setting, of how learning stories should be practiced and implemented. The interviews gave insight into the way in which the participants identified quality features in regard to learning stories, such as accuracy in observation and documentation that give authenticity to learning story processes, but at the same time they are aware of the barriers that potentially compromised this process.

4.3.12 Despite Challenges, Learning Stories Viewed as Beneficial

Participants enthusiastically described the benefits of learning stories within the setting. They referred to stories recalled or revisited by children and the support that the story can provide for future learning. When talking about their experiences with learning stories, most participants described experiences where older children shared or revisited stories from their earlier years in the nursery, and the sense of achievement that this provided for the child. *"For children, it's always fun when we make a portfolio for them and when they are four or five years old and they look back to those portfolios… they feel proud of themselves… I think learning stories – that is the biggest benefit they have."* [P2]

Participants noted a strong focus on benefits for the child, in which learning stories supported the child's pride, self-confidence and achievement, through the use of images, shared celebrations and opportunities for a child to revisit previous learning experiences. *"It is really*

good to celebrate the children… they really will see their progress. I see it is absolutely a big benefit for them, for their early years" [P5]. Perspectives also included the potential of learning stories to support and track a child's interests, needs and learning in the setting, while meeting parents' needs in term of documentation and evidence.

> *Benefits for, first for the child… We can always see the supports, what the child needs or what are the positive points that we can see from that setting itself. Second is, it has big benefits for the practitioners, because we can always track where can we support the child itself. And another thing is for the parents, parents need lots of write-ups and evidence that the child has really magical days in your setting. So, it is not just that they send them here and they do nothing; that they just eat and sleep. No, these are good evidence to show them that their child has really something in the early year settings.* [P6]

One practitioner noted that learning stories benefit and support the practice of authentic observation, explaining that they serve as a reminder to teachers to stop and observe before interrupting and redirecting play. She stated *"for teachers, it is like a reminder as well that you need to wait and you need to check as well"* [P1]. She commented that the observation process of learning story assessment allows teachers to consider their involvement, such that child initiated play becomes unhindered. Also discussed was the child's happiness, along with happiness experienced by parents and teachers.

Learning stories are viewed by all participants as beneficial in a varying range of ways. While they describe challenges associated with this approach to assessment, overall perspectives by the practitioners are positive. The following chapter further explores the significance of these

findings, and makes connections to the literature highlighting some key similarities and

differences to implementation practices in ECE in Dubai.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

The present study examined ECE teachers' perspectives about learning stories and their understandings about and implementation methods of this assessment approach within their setting in Dubai. This case study, which expands on recent New Zealand research, comprised of six qualitative in-depth interviews with teachers and focused on investigating their perspectives of the quality features of learning stories.

Through inductive data analysis, 12 themes emerged relating to learning story implementation in this unique ECE setting in Dubai. These included, the involvement of teacher facilitation within learning stories; a learning story's ability to highlight a child's strengths, interests and needs; next steps and follow-up learning stories seldomly documented; children engaged and involved intermittently within the learning story process; parents peripheral in the approach; learning stories implemented to fit the curriculum; documentation and evidence seen as a primary purpose of learning stories; learning stories support reflective practices; teacher collaboration and communication about learning stories top-down and informal; potential for setting conditions to have a negative effect on the quality of learning stories; learning stories that are accurate, objective and support future planning are important to teachers; and despite challenges, learning stories viewed as beneficial. Based on the findings within theses 12 themes, the discussion will attend to the research questions, including how learning stories are implemented in one nursery in Dubai, what the teachers in this nursery know and believe about learning stories and their perspectives on the quality features of learning stories.

The present study offers an opportunity to explore contextual differences between the understanding and implementation of learning stories in Dubai, New Zealand, and other international contexts. To this end, the discussion will first consider notions related to the educational transfer of curriculum and in this case learning stories, and the implications present within different cultural contexts. Teachers' understandings and implementation methods of learning stories will be addressed, illuminating some of the key similarities and differences between approaches in Dubai in comparison to New Zealand and other international settings. At the same time, broader connections will be made to assessment quality through Snyder, McLaughlin and McLean's (2014) review of six guiding frameworks in ECE which highlights key recommendations for quality assessment.

5.2 Cultural Transfer

Within the 12 themes, cultural and contextual differences emerge that highlight the variations in implementation between practice in New Zealand and Dubai. Learning stories were developed within the New Zealand sociocultural framework for curriculum and assessment and rely on community and whānau relationships and dialogue to support learning and teaching (Carr et al., 2002). The context for this study is embedded in an entirely different pedagogical and policy framework. In contrast to the sociocultural system of parent and ECE partnerships, which emphasises reciprocal relationships and collaboration between community, parents, educators and children, in the UAE hierarchy dominates through autocratic systems of leadership. Participants descriptions of the learning story implementation described a process whereby decision making rested with the teacher as expert. This means that learning, planning and assessment is likely to be monitored closely or controlled by the one qualified teacher/leader,

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thus limiting collaborative decision making and a sense of team ownership and reflection, as well as whānau involvement. This pedagogical system of top-down leadership reflects the uniqueness of this ECE setting, and provides an interesting framework for curriculum and assessment, within which to examine the findings and to explore comparisons between practices originally intended for learning story implementation in the New Zealand context.

Examining how approaches to teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment vary across countries is often described as comparative education (Crossley, 2010). However, the notion of the exportation or importation of specific approaches developed in one country being used in another will be referred to in this discussion as cultural transfer and may involve some level of cultural adaptation. In particular one author who writes about research related to comparative education and cultural transfer is Crossley. This is based on his doctoral research which investigated the transfer of western developed curriculum into an education system in Papua New Guinea in the 1980s. His research "challenged the simplistic transfer and importation of western models of school-based curriculum development into school, system and professional contexts where such initiatives held far from realistic expectations" (Crossley, 2010, p. 423). Educational priorities and needs are relative to context and culture and therefore taking one approach that is developed and relevant to one background and community may present similarities in some areas and differences in others in terms of practice and implementation. Adaptations are likely inevitable as one culture makes meaning of new systems and approaches as they are adopted into the new context.

Nyland and Alfayez, in their study within this region of the Middle East discuss the idea that Saudi Arabia is an eclectic mix of cultures and approaches to education borrowed from *Western ideologies*. They speak of the advantages of adopting international approaches stating

that they "can contribute to countries developing educational system" (2012, p. 401). They also suggest that the learning story assessment method grounded in a socio-cultural approach has the potential to value and acknowledge the uniqueness of local culture and context.

Given the cultural transfer of learning stories from New Zealand to UAE the findings are discussed in terms of how learning story practices and implementation were originally intended from whence they came and how cultural transfer influences their implementation in the present context including contextual challenges as well as strengths in the implementation of learning stories. The similarities and differences identified in the use of learning stories in the current setting, provides insights that may support recent research related to the quality features of learning and assessment.

The discussion below begins with a reflection on the similarities in the findings related to challenges in gathering multiple perspectives, advantages of the reflective practices inherent within learning stories, and critique when implemented as the sole approach to assessment. Discussion then attends to the contextual and cultural differences that exist between countries in terms of orientation towards credit and needs-based learning stories, approaches to how curriculum and assessment align in practice and teachers aims for objectively focused learning stories. Throughout the discussion connections are made between the teachers' understandings of the quality features of learning stories, while also making links to wider key quality features of assessment. Limitations of the study are identified, followed by recommendations for future research and key insights and contributions of the study.

5.3 Similarities within Implementation Practices

5.3.1 Multiple Perspectives

      Family involvement is considered a key theme in quality assessment, through collaborative approaches to decision making and family participation to support assessment processes (Snyder et al., 2014). Carr (2011) describes the level of parent participation as playing an important part in the quality of learning story implementation. As highlighted earlier Dunn (2004) suggests that *coverage* and *agreement*, or assessment observed and developed through a multiple of lenses and collaborative perspectives supports authenticity of the learning story approach. Parent participation is considered a fundamental quality feature in the implementation of the learning story framework in supporting authentic and responsive assessment. Whyte's action research in a New Zealand context stated, "teachers never have complete knowledge about the child; instead, collaborating with parent and others broadens the teacher's understandings of the child" (2010, p. 22). In addition to being a source of information about children, the involvement of parents in learning stories has also included the importance of teachers sharing information with parents and families (Buldu, 2010; Daniels, 2013) to support continuity of learning across home and setting contexts.

      In the present study teachers primarily experienced parents as being peripheral to the learning story process. In terms of parent collaboration, parents had limited opportunity to reflect or contribute to the learning stories. While their involvement was valued by the teacher, learning stories appear to be implemented in such a way that parent contributions were limited to shared parent and teacher reflections on individual learning observations. The participants reportedly provided parents an opportunity to read and celebrate their child's learning stories once in a term, therefore allowing parents access to their child's portfolio and learning stories

only three times per year. Consequently, parents' access and participation appeared to be somewhat restricted and potentially the reason behind their peripheral engagement in the learning story process.

Difficulty in engaging parents or gaining their active involvement has also been reported in New Zealand research. For example, while Whyte's (2010) research described parent involvement as a desirable attribute of the learning stories approach, teachers and teams have found it difficult to get that parent engagement at times. This type of limited engagement has also been identified in other research. In the UAE, Buldu (2010) undertook a study of a school's endeavour to implement pedagogical documentation through the display of learning documentation panels as an approach to formative assessment. While they found increased parent interest, there were contextual challenges related to parent participation, including limited face to face communication with parents, due to school transport or nannies dropping off and collecting the child from the setting. This meant few opportunities for teachers to share pedagogical documentation displays with parents. A suggestion identified through the study was that sending these displays home through newsletter might eliminate such challenges.

Given challenges with parent engagement in several country contexts, perhaps alternative methods or processes may need to be uncovered to successfully and effectively capture parent participation as identified by Buldo (2010). To this end Whyte (2010) noted a disconnect between parent contribution to their child's learning story, and changed the process of parent voice form, instead providing parents with an 'initiating parent voice' form on the same day of the learning observation, to capture perspectives from home. Seeking parent contributions immediately, and while the child's learning was current, found positive results in terms of parent contribution. With this in mind, authenticity, *coverage* and *agreement* (Dunn, 2004) seem likely

outcomes of such an approach to parent participation. In the current context, it may be necessary have parents contribute to learning throughout the assessment process rather than at the end. Snyder et al., describe family involvement through "information sharing – formal and informal procedures are used to share information in a family-friendly way and information shared is useful for program planning" (2014, p. 413). Therefore alternative methods of encouraging family participation and information sharing might perhaps support current implementation challenges and support quality outcomes.

5.3.2 Culture of Shared and Reflective Practices

Given that the learning story approach to assessment is relatively new within the setting there appears to be a valued culture of shared practice across the teacher respondents that has contributed to gradual change and improvement over time. On one hand participants describe elements of hierarchy, while on the other hand they identify valued opportunities for peer shared best practices and continuing professional development (CPD). The teachers' beliefs related to shared and reflective approaches to professional learning across the setting, relates similarly to research developed internationally and illustrates the opportunities for reflective practices that learning stories bring to pedagogy. Several studies that explore how learning stories are implemented in practice within Canada, England, Australia and Saudi Arabia, all highlight elements of the process that enable a level of professional reflection and which facilitates a focus towards improved practices. In Saudi Arabia learning stories were trialed as a means to support reflective practices within pre-service teachers and ultimately improve quality (Nyland & Alfayez, 2012). In Canada the teacher and researcher explored learning stories as an alternative assessment method and described the process as "a learning story nested within a learning story"

(Hope-Southcott, 2015, p. 35). She found that they contributed to more authentic assessment, through which the teacher was able to reflect back on action taken and teaching. In an Australian study which explored teachers' perceptions on the use of digital media within learning stories, findings illustrated the benefit that images and photos bring to professional reflective practices (Boardman, 2007). While these findings are representative of the research samples only, they do highlight perspectives and beliefs towards a potential for reflective practice and collaboration that learning stories can present in terms of a shared vision towards growth and change.

Intrinsic within the Ministry of Education's guiding booklets, *Kei Tua o te Pae* there is an emphasis on shared ideas and examples of learning stories to support the New Zealand ECE learning community. This collection of exemplars are presented as a "professional development resource to enable learning communities to discuss assessment issues in general" (Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 2). Subsequently these books advocate discussion, reflection and learning together as a community. It is encouraging therefore that teachers within the current study refer to experiences of learning from each other. While at times teacher collaboration is noted as being top-down and informal, there has been improvement in learning story practices, as the teachers within the setting note a momentum of change. Perhaps this is on account of what appears to be regular training and CPD opportunities over time. There also appears to be a genuine motivation for improvement, in that all practitioners noted their desire for further CPD, presumably in areas they seek to improve and develop further over time. It is likely that the implementation of learning stories will continue to evolve within the setting, developing and changing as a result of the groups collective willingness for growth.

This approach somewhat resembles a *Community of Practice*, defined by Wenger and Snyder as "groups of people … bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint

enterprise" (2000, p. 139). Defined by a New Zealand Centre of Innovation within their action research surrounding leadership, a community of practice is explained as "shared practice, shared knowledge and an element of transformation when teachers work together 'to expand their knowledge'" (Bary, Deans, Charlton, Hullett, Martin, Martin, … Scrivens, 2008, p. 39). Communities of practice have become a contributor to the change and growth of learning story assessment in some settings in New Zealand, subsequently, it is positive to note elements of the same in the teachers' beliefs within this case study. Through continued shared reflective professional dialogue, the team will be able to continue defining their own ideas for quality practices of learning stories and thus articulating what features are valued in relation to their context.

5.3.3 Risk of Anecdotal Narratives

While the findings of the current study affirmed the strengths and opportunities afforded by a learning stories approach, some critique is also warranted in light of the literature that challenges the use of learning stories as an exclusive approach to assessment. For example, Perkins (2013) discourse analysis of *Kei Tua o te Pae* criticises that learning stories are often singular snapshots or one-off narratives, rather than robust assessment measures that capture learning and progress over time. Mawson's (2011) research also reflected that continuity between sessions, as well as the integration of planning and assessment was seen as an issue in Playcentre's in New Zealand. Similar issues were evident in the current study, in which the learning stories shared typically presented a series of *one-off* observations, calling into question the quality of ongoing planning and assessment in ways that fostered rich teaching and learning experiences over time.

Snyder et al., explain the importance of the *utility* of the instrument of assessment, and the quality use of this tool "using them for their intended purposes" (2014, p. 414). Learning stories were intended to document a rich pathway of learning demonstrating a child's achievements and learning over time and in different contexts (Carr, 2011). Findings in the present study are similar to findings from Mawson (2011) and Perkins (2013), in that there is very little feedback shared by participants to substantiate that learning stories follow a journey of child-led learning and play. Comments related to continuity of learning, and the nature of child directed learning experiences were very limited.

This is also a challenge to the foundations of child empowerment and agency that are so central to *Te Whāriki* and the pedagogy that was intended to guide a learning stories approach. Furthermore, learning stories are implemented in such a way that they are collected once a term for each child and therefore capture only one learning moment in three months. This suggests that learning stories are written merely as an anecdotal record, capturing single snapshots of the individual child's learning, rather than an information rich series of documentation of child development and progress over time. *Ongoing* assessment collected over time is a quality feature identified by Snyder et al., (2014), it could be argued that learning stories are not collected regularly enough to contribute to such quality standards.

While practitioner's intentions are well meaning, it may be that Dubai's efforts in implementing learning stories do not reflect the original intent of the approach and the principles of assessment laid down in Carr's original work and foundational in *Te Whāriki*. This is the challenge of transferring an approach outside of the wider pedagogical framework. Yet, local studies also suggest that such issues persist in NZ settings, which suggests challenges in relation to the overall pedagogical approach to assessment in ECE. In summary, this case study

contributes further evidence to recent criticisms of learning stories that question the effectiveness and quality of assessment if implemented as the sole approach. It might be necessary to consider the possibility of multiple tools of assessment, in order to contribute to a richer view of the child's progress and learning over time.

5.4 Contextual and Cultural Differences

5.4.1 Approaches within Pedagogy, Practice and Curriculum

In the sociocultural based pedagogy of ECE in New Zealand, learning stories are documented as credit-based narratives that prioritise children's strengths and interests. As Williamson et al., describe, "learning stories are told from a strength base and the narrator's interpretations are interspersed throughout" (2006, p. 21). This approach, as embedded in New Zealand ECE assessment practices has faced criticism for providing limited attention to the identification of, and subsequent planning for, children's areas of need. In a study that explored how Special Educational Needs (SEN) teachers approached learning stories from a needs-aware approach, in comparison with a credit-based approach from early childhood teachers, found the latter potentially presented a distorted picture of assessment (Dunn, 2004). This view is particularly relevant given that the recently revised version of *Te Whāriki* suggests that practitioners should identify a child's needs as well as strengths and interests (Ministry of Education, 2017). This re-orientation to consider developmental needs prompts a review and evaluation of current assessment practices within the New Zealand ECE sector, to reassess how this will potentially affect the current credit-based learning stories assessment approach (McLachlan, 2018).

In the present case study teachers described that their learning stories linked learning to curriculum objectives, highlighting a child's individual strengths, interests and also needs. This method of implementation highlights a significant difference between the approaches adopted in New Zealand and Dubai. It might be that teaching that recognises and responds to children's needs is a matter of teacher belief, perspective and culture, as reflected in Al-Momani's et al., (2008) UAE based study that questioned teachers about their perspectives on the effectiveness of curriculum and assessment in local kindergartens. With just under half of the participants preferring a more instructional curriculum and prescribed teaching practices, it is suggested this could be a result of "the familiarity of the teachers with the direct instruction approach used in the traditional curriculum to which they were accustomed from their time as students" (Al-Momani et al, 2008, p. 249).

This is relative to the present study which found that learning stories were typically centred around teacher facilitated experiences, where the teachers' role is described in terms of facilitating activities to support children in less competent areas of development. While this may be so, it may also be a matter of curriculum in which the EYFS has an underlying purpose of measuring and monitoring assessment objectives. In which case, baseline assessments and unmet expected developmental levels signal a child's needs for further support through teacher planned experiences. The framework states, "Assessment plays an important part in helping parents, carers and practitioners to recognise children's progress, understand their needs, and to plan activities and support" (Department for Education, 2017, p. 13). Ultimately, this setting presents unique findings that provide insights into how the learning stories method of assessment have the ability to capture and support a child's needs and further, how the curriculum designed

for one context has been fitted to an assessment method designed for an entirely different context.

Fitting and implementing learning stories alongside the EYFS, the English national ECE curriculum into the UAE ECE sector, presents interesting considerations related to cultural transfer. An ECE curriculum with a purpose to identify a child's progress, needs and achievement levels, has been paired with an assessment method with a purpose to identify a child's strengths and interests. Each method originating in separate countries, and both introduced to Dubai and brought together into one setting offered an interesting opportunity to explore cultural considerations in implementation. In the introduction to this study the EYFS was examined in terms of how assessment was represented and described. The assessment methods that are identified within this curriculum, are formative assessments through ongoing observation, two-year-old progress check and a child assessment profile that highlights level of achievement. These levels are described in terms of expected, exceeding, or not reaching learning objectives (Department of Education, 2017). What was clear in the findings of the present study, is that the participants view learning stories as the singular approach to assessment within their setting and perhaps therefore a higher importance or focus is placed on formative assessments through ongoing observation. They did not describe methods of assessment that included progress checks or levels of achievement.

The cultural transfer and unique fit of curriculum and assessment approach within this Dubai based ECE context is an interesting case. Perhaps the significant difference between the two curriculums is the overall objective of assessment, in that the EYFS requires measured levels of achievement and *Te Whāriki* does not. The differences highlighted in the current context and what this means in terms of the changes within *Te Whāriki* present considerations related to

learning stories ability to support a child's needs. Further research will be required to identify how a balance can be maintained between identifying a child's needs through formative observations, at the same time identifying areas of developmental need where a child may require support.

The teachers in this case understand, implement and somewhat align learning stories assessment with the EYFS curriculum. The key assessment requirements of this curriculum is that a complete understanding of the child is collected through formative observation in all areas of their development. Therefore, teachers in combining the EYFS curriculum and learning story assessment have found an implementation method that attempts to achieve this. Though it may digress from learning stories intended focus of strengths base, it nonetheless meets and somewhat aligns with the current curriculum framework and at the same time provides a new perspective.

5.4.2 Learning Stories are Intended to be Objectively Focused

Carr describes traditional models of assessment as having an objective purpose, she positions learning stories alternatively and describes their purpose as "interpreted observations, discussions and agreements" (2001, p. 3). This description recognises the subjective process within learning story writing and the role practitioners' play collectively in discussing and interpreting the child's engagement in learning. Recent critique to emerge more recently in literature, questions the notion of learning stories as subjective. In terms of teacher perspective in observation, Blaiklock states, "a potential problem with Learning Stories is that objectivity is not sought when first describing and documenting a child's learning experience" (2008, p. 80). He writes that learning stories use a subjective approach to writing, and asks the question,

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could the observer instead attempt to capture learning stories objectively. Practitioners in the current setting sought to identify learning objectively with the intent to capture and document the learning story exactly as they saw and heard, though at times they describe challenges in observing authentically and objectively.

Knauf's (2018) research findings reveal the presence of both subjectivity and objectivity in learning stories in the way they are practiced by teachers in a setting in Germany. Findings showed that over half of the learning stories examined in this study were written with an objective focus. Knauf writes about these factual reports, "in these learning stories, the person who wrote the text had no identifiable presence, and the content was presented as objective information about the child" (2018, p. 431). It is suggested that this may be due to the teacher's lack of awareness of subjectivity aims in learning story writing, in which the voice of the teacher is welcomed and affirmed, or that they may not be collaborating in their interpretations of individual learning stories. This raises the question, why in some international settings learning stories are practiced and understood by teachers with an objective approach that serves to remove the teacher's voice and focus on factual description. For the practitioners in the current study this may reflect that their previous experiences of more objective models of assessment have filtered through into their perspectives of learning stories. If this is the case, then the findings and suggestions provided by Knauf related to teachers' lack of awareness of subjective (or interpretive) aims of learning stories may be true for the present research, again affirming the need for the learning stories model to be situated within wider beliefs about assessment when being adopted and adapted for other contexts.

Practitioners describe notions of authenticity within their descriptions of objectively written learning stories, this suggests that authenticity is a quality feature recognised within the

setting. Given that the focus of observation appears to differ between approaches and context, it is perhaps then how the data is collected and analysed and larger issues of quality assessment such as validity, authenticity, informed judgement and multiple methods that may be more important. In their review of quality assessment Snyder et al., identify *authenticity* as a key dimension relating to "observations of children in natural settings performing typical activities and tasks (with familiar adults and peers)" (2014, p. 412). Similarly, quality assessment and authenticity is described as that which is observed to be "naturally occurring" (Bagnato, cited in Zhang, 2016, p. 2). Carr's aims for learning stories are grounded in collaborative discussion whereby the community together has an opportunity to make informed judgements about what learning is deemed important. In terms of assessment, this discussion provides a platform for deciding what is an appropriate evaluation for the child and situation (Carr, 2001). To ensure validity of observation and authenticity of assessment, therefore requires a collaborative approach through the shared multiple perspectives of informed and knowledgeable practitioners. These elements of quality assessment overlap with the discussion areas raised above and highlight an overall interconnectedness relevant to the broader goal of authentic observation.

5.5 Quality Features

The underlying questions raised within this study seek to identify the quality features of learning stories as understood by a small group of teachers in Dubai. The teachers' perspectives and descriptions of learning stories highlight some similarities and some differences between the way they are understood and originally intended for practice in New Zealand. Their understandings are largely attributed to the cross-cultural position, which helps illuminate the findings to the research questions.

Some areas of discussion are consistent with findings from other studies related to learning story assessment from both New Zealand and international research. The similarities highlighted related to; challenges in gathering family involvement; advantages towards supporting reflective practices and change; and critique that suggest learning stories lack continuity. On the other hand, differences of approach evident in this context related to pedagogy and alignment of curriculum; and objectivity in the capturing of learning stories from the perspective of authentic observation. The quality features of learning stories important to the teachers within this culturally diverse and unique setting, make connections to wider perspectives of quality assessment. Collaboration through shared multiple perspectives are valued and ongoing and authentic observations while may be challenging to collect, are an important feature in documenting learning. Though not directly identified by teachers but important to note, is that this study suggests that greater family involvement and multiple approaches or tools to assessment might further support authenticity.

5.6 Study Design Limitations

This single case study is based on teachers' perspectives in one setting in the United Arab Emirates and therefore represents a small sample. It highlights the perspectives of a small group of teachers in an international ECE context in which learning stories are not widely practiced.

The study does not investigate the content of the teaching and learning described within the learning stories, as the teachers were invited to bring copies of their stories to their interview purely as an elicitation method to encourage discussion. Therefore, this research does not explore the learning story in depth, such as how dispositions or areas of the curriculum are captured. It was not possible to explore the ongoing cycle of observation, assessment and

planning as a whole and how these three areas came together in the setting to support continuity

of learning. Further, teachers' perspectives while serving as an effective lens for exploring

learning stories, are just as they are described and discussed by the participant. In other words,

they are six teacher's interpretations, beliefs and descriptions of how they perceive learning

stories are practiced and implemented in their setting. These perspectives though valuable are

subject to personal influences such as bias, optimism, and disillusionment which will have

shaped the responses given.

5.7 Directions for Future Research

Following on from the present study, there are a few key areas recommended for future

research. Primarily, continued investigation of learning story implementation methods and

quality features in other international settings appears to be of ongoing value. Research that

examines learning story implementation and cultural transfer to other countries may provide new

insights and approaches that support the methods in which learning stories are practiced within

New Zealand. With this wider focus in mind, there are more specific areas of emphasis that have

been highlighted in the international findings of this study that may benefit from further

investigation in other countries. There are some interesting areas for discussion and

investigation, related to objectivity in the learning story observation process and summative

approaches to documentation and assessment. Also, further research in terms of teachers'

perspectives related to supporting a child's strengths, interests and needs in a learning story will

be important given the changes in *Te Whāriki* in New Zealand. Further studies would support

the current limited body of research surrounding learning stories and might contribute new

findings or comparisons to existing knowledge and understandings of how learning stories are practiced in other countries.

5.8 Key Insights and Contributions/ Implications for Practice

The key contribution of this study is the insight offered through examining the potential implications of taking practices which originated and are embedded in one culture and community and transferring them to another. While challenges are evident, there are successes within this case study that suggest that the cultural transfer of learning stories may illustrate new approaches or understandings that benefit the continued scope of learning story use, both internationally and in the New Zealand setting. Findings affirm that the flexibility and reflective potential offered by a learning stories approach serves to that enable and allow alternative interpretations to emerge, and fosters adaptive and responsive implementation practices to suit new contexts.

Collaboration between practitioners, parents, and the child are key elements of the learning stories process but this partnership is identified as being problematic or challenging to foster. When learning is shared across contexts, then each setting can be more responsive to the child, and the child's development is fostered in rich and holistic ways. Findings support the continuing need to seek out alternative methods for encouraging this active discussion between groups, and the fostering of shared understandings and aspirations. Further this study suggests that using multiple tools for assessment supports authentic practices. Learning stories when implemented alongside other assessment approaches provides multiple perspectives from which to base assessment of child development and learning.

Also, of note is the importance of the leadership approach within the setting. Leadership and centre policy appears to have an effect on the culture of learning story practices, including pressure related to deadlines, expectations for the timing and nature of learning stories, decision making practices within the writing process and the impact on the motivation and dedication of practitioners. When leadership supports the potential of learning stories within an overall pedagogical approach it seems that learning stories have the potential to encourage a reflective culture of continuous professional development, growth and change within a setting. This is a positive culture in which to support and nurture progress.

5.9 Final Summary and Conclusion

Since their inception into the ECE sector, learning stories have gained momentum as the most commonly practiced approach towards assessment within New Zealand. They were developed with a specific set of intentions and purposes that met the socio-cultural pedagogy, curriculum and context within which ECE New Zealand is embedded. As learning stories gained interest around the world, and other countries began to adopt and adapt this method of assessment, new perspectives and implementation approaches developed through cultural transfer. This study set out to explore teachers' perspectives of the quality features of learning stories and their implementation within one ECE setting in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, to extend on New Zealand's current research and to present new international understandings from a somewhat unique context.

The method of research was a qualitative case study, through semi structured in-depth interview of six teachers from one ECE setting in Dubai. Highlighted within the teachers' discussions, were the following 12 themes; the involvement of teacher facilitation within

learning stories; a learning story's ability to highlight a child's strengths, interests and needs; next steps and follow-up learning stories seldomly documented; children engaged and involved intermittently within the learning story process; parents peripheral in the approach; learning stories implemented to fit the curriculum; documentation and evidence seen as a primary purpose of learning stories; learning stories support reflective practices; teacher collaboration and communication about learning stories top-down and informal; potential for setting conditions to have a negative effect on the quality of learning stories; learning stories that are accurate, objective and support future planning are important to teachers; and despite challenges, learning stories viewed as beneficial. The teachers' perspectives illuminated contextual and cultural similarities and differences in the way learning stories were implemented in their setting. The main findings related to quality features were centred around an overarching idea of authenticity of learning stories.

Ultimately learning stories are characterised by the socio-cultural practices in which they are embedded, and this largely impacts authenticity and quality features of learning story assessment. At times, ideals for authenticity were not always practiced by the teachers implementing learning stories in this study or even apparent in their perspectives, but their best intentions for authenticity appear to be. With all this in mind, it is perhaps important to consider extra methods and approaches to assessment in order to gather a truly robust understanding of child development and thus quality and authentic assessment.

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Appendix A: Information Sheet

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
TE KURA O TE MĀTAURANGA

Teachers' Perspectives of Learning Stories and their Implementation in Dubai

INFORMATION SHEET FOR TEACHERS

Researcher Introduction
My name is Sharon Ward and I am a student at Massey University, currently researching for my thesis as I study towards a Master of Education in the Early Years. The purpose of this study is to develop a research project that will investigate learning stories and their implementation in Dubai.

Project Description and Invitation
This study seeks to investigate teachers' perspectives of learning stories and to understand how they are implemented in Dubai nurseries. The information shared below provides an overview and description of the intended study.

As a nursery teacher of Beautiful Minds Nurseries, you are invited to participate in the study.

Participant Identification and Recruitment
Your nursery was identified as including learning stories in your assessment methods. Your nursery manager has given permission for me to contact you and extend this invitation. Your participation in this study is voluntary.

Project Procedures
If you agree to participate, the study involves one interview which will require up to an hour of time and will be conducted in a private space within the nursery. You will be asked to bring two examples of learning stories that you have written yourself. One learning story should be an example that you believe to be of high quality while the other one that you feel is of lower quality or needs work. The learning stories will not be collected, nor will they be read by myself. You will be asked questions related to these learning stories, and therefore they will serve merely as a talking point to support your recall and experiences of learning story implementation. Interviews will be voice recorded for later transcribing and this will be made available for you to later read and review.

Data Management
Recorded interviews will be transcribed by a professional service in New Zealand. Transcripts will be shared with my supervisors. The information collected will be stored on my personal computer, which only I have access to. A back-up will be stored in an online drop box and made available to the two university supervisors guiding the research process. All transcripts and recorded interviews will be kept for a minimum of 3 years before it is deleted by myself and supervisors.

Your privacy and anonymity will be upheld to the fullest extent possible. Teachers and nurseries will be allocated pseudonyms, and any possible identifying features will not be shared. All data collected will be used solely for research purposes and any resulting presentations or publications. Participants will be

emailed a link providing access to a summary of the project findings shared through a drop box folder. This will allow participants to view a *read only* summary in *word document*.

Participant's Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:
- *decline to answer any particular question;*
- *withdraw from the study before the end of April 2019;*
- *ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;*
- *provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;*
- *be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.*
- *ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.*

Project Contacts
- Researcher –   Sharon Ward - ███████████████, ███████████
- Supervisors – Dr. Tara McLaughlin - t.w.mclaughlin@massey.ac.nz
                 Dr. Karyn Aspden - k.m.aspden@massey.ac.nz

Participants are welcome to contact the researcher and/or supervisors if they have any questions about the project.

LOW RISK NOTIFICATIONS

"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 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 please contact Prof Craig Johnson, Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 356 9099 x 85271, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz".

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
TE KURA O TE MĀTAURANGA

Teachers' Perspectives of Learning Stories and their Implementation in Dubai

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL

I have read and understand the Information Sheet for this study. I have had the details of the study explained to me, any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

1. I agree to the interview being sound recorded.
2. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Declaration by Participant:

I _____ *(print full name)* hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: _____   Date: _____

Appendix C: Interview Schedule

The aim of this study is to understand how learning stories are understood and implemented by early childhood teachers in the UAE. The research intends to extend on New Zealand's current research, as it examines the quality features of learning stories, from teachers' perspectives, in an international context. This is expressed in three specific research questions.

- How are learning stories implemented by early childhood teachers in Dubai?
- What do they know and believe about learning stories?
- What are their perspectives on the quality features?

Interview Protocol

Let's start by talking about the learning stories you brought with you today…

1. (Process – Noticing, Recognising) Looking at the high-quality learning story that you have chosen to bring with you today, tell me about how or where the story started or began?
   - Tell me about the situation as it took place? (where, what, how)
   - At what point did you realise that the child's play would become a learning story?
   - How did you record the learning story?
   - Who was involved in the event?
   - What were the key points you wanted to capture in this learning story?

2. (Process – Responding) After you had noticed this event and decided it would be a learning story, how did you capture the story and take it further?
   - After you witnessed the learning story taking place, when did you document it?
   - Who was involved in the process of writing the learning story?
   - Can you tell me who you shared this story with? And the process of sharing the learning story?
   - What was the length of time between the event and the story being shared.
   - As a classroom, how do you tend to go about collecting learning stories?

3. (What Next) What did you do with these learning stories after you completed them?
   - In what way did the learning story guide your subsequent teaching for that child?
   - You mention…... Can you share more detail with me about exactly how you did this?
   - What do you believe was the ultimate result of writing this learning story / what effect did the learning story have?
   - Is there any other way this learning story resulted in or impacted outcomes for the individual child?

4. (Quality Features) Tell me about what you think makes this a strong learning story?
   - Why did you choose to bring this story today?
   - When you read this story how does it make you feel?
   - Are there any other things that you think might be important for learning stories that are not used in this learning story?

5. (Quality Features) Looking at the learning story that you feel requires more work, tell me about why you identified this as needing more work?
   - How did you come to this decision when selecting this learning story to bring today?
   - What would you do differently with one like this in future?
   - When comparing the two learning stories side by side, in your opinion how do they differ?
   - What do you think lead to the differences in these two stories?

At this point, we are going to switch gears and talk about learning stories in general.

6. (Context) Tell me about your background and experiences with using learning stories?
   - Where did you first experience learning stories?
   - How long have you been using learning stories?
   - Have you used learning stories in other settings, either internationally or locally in Dubai? If so, what have been the similarities/differences in the way they have been practiced in these settings?

7. (Professional Development) Can you tell me what training or professional development you have received surrounding learning stories?
   - What details can you recall about this professional development experience?
   - How many hours training in learning stories would you say that you have had?
   - If you could have access to further learning story professional development, would you like more training? In what areas? (may flow more smoothly that the below prompt)

8. (Positives/Negatives) What do you believe are the benefits of using learning stories in a nursery setting?
   - For teachers, parents, children…
   - How do you think parents respond to reading their child's learning stories?
   - How do children respond to seeing/reading their learning stories?
   - Have you experienced any challenges in using learning stories? Can you tell me about those?

9. (Purpose/Assessment) What purpose do learning stories serve within your nursery?
   - Looking back at the learning stories you brought today, tell me what you were wanting to achieve with writing these stories?
   - How do learning stories fit within your nurseries practicing curriculum?
   - How do learning stories connect with other areas of nursery practice? In what ways do learning stories fit within your wider assessment approach in the nursery?

10. Do you have any other comments or experiences related to learning stories that you would like to share with me?

Appendix D: Ethics Approval

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

Date: 08 August 2018

Dear Sharon Ward

Re: Ethics Notification - 4000019958 - Teachers' Perspectives of Learning Stories and their Implementation in Dubai

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 Professor Craig Johnson, Director - Ethics, telephone 06 3569099 ext 85271, 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

Research Ethics Office, Research and Enterprise
Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North, 4442, New Zealand T 06 350 5573; 06 350 5575 F 06 355 7973
E humanethics@massey.ac.nz W http://humanethics.massey.ac.nz

Human Ethics Low Risk notification

Professor Craig Johnson
Chair. Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethics)