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Ngā Akoranga pai o te Tuhinga Pūrākau. Lessons from the heart of Learning Stories

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ABSTRACT
This study investigated how New Zealand teachers in Early Childhood Education (ECE) gathered, documented and utilised assessment information about children's learning. It utilised phenomenological inquiry, with data being gathered through semi-structured interviews with five experienced ECE teachers. The findings highlight the complexity of the predominant narrative assessment format used by the teachers: Learning Stories. The strong reliance on teachers' fundamental competencies and understanding of the writing process was central to narrative assessment. On the other hand, findings emphasised the benefits of well-written Learning Stories and highlighted interesting ways they can be utilised. This article focuses on two important aspects of ECE assessment. Firstly, the teacher who is the heart of the Learning Story-writing process, and who possesses a complex skill set to connect with people, collect information and articulate an important message about the child as a learner. Secondly, on the Learning Story itself, its benefits and the ways that assessment information can be utilised from them.

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Assessment in ECE

Assessment is one of the most challenging tasks teachers face in all levels of education (Smith 2013). In early childhood education (ECE) assessment data, as evidence of learning, is based on what children say, do, draw or write. This evidence is analysed with the purpose of bestowing a rich picture of the characteristics of young children's learning, acting and thinking, and of making a range of children's learning visible so teachers can put it to good use (Drummond 2011; Dunphy 2010). In this paper, we are particularly interested in how New Zealand teachers in ECE gather, document and use assessment information about children's learning.

The assessment process has a strong connection to ECE curricula (Alasuutari, Markström, and Vallberg-Roth 2014; Dunphy 2010; OECD 2012). On one hand, a curriculum provides learning outcomes for teachers to assess against and guides the assessment process (McLachlan 2018). On the other hand, the assessment methods can impede,

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depress, reinforce or invigorate the curriculum (Lee et al. 2013; Smith 2013). An important feature of an effective assessment design is that the teachers' understanding of the child's learning is utilised to enhance the curriculum they offer (Drummond 2011).

Assessment in New Zealand

ECE assessment practices in New Zealand (NZ) have a strong connection to the national ECE curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education [MOE] 2017), and are guided by and align with its principles, strands and learning outcomes (Arndt and Tesar 2015; Carr 2001). Te Whāriki outlines a sociocultural model of learning that weaves together complex patterns of children's linked experiences and thinking rather than focusing on the acquisition of specific knowledge and skills (Education Review Office [ERO] 2011; McLachlan 2011; OECD 2012). Through this model, children's relationships with their peers, teachers, physical surroundings, and families and community are seen as interwoven parts of their development and lives (Arndt and Tesar 2015). This curriculum conceptualises learning as encompassing working theories and dispositions (Carr and Lee 2012). Te Whāriki characterises the main purpose of assessment as making valued learning visible and using assessment information for informing families, whānau (extended family), children, teachers and support agencies about children's learning and development over time (MOE 2017).

Assessment practice in ECE in NZ is based on continued observations as teachers watch, listen and interact with a group of children or with an individual child. The child is observed in action, in the learning environment, and in a sociocultural context (Buchanan 2011; Carr 2001; Carr and Lee 2019; MOE 2017). Children's learning dispositions are in the centre of the assessment (Mitchell 2008). Current NZ ECE assessment practice has been determined as formative and implemented in formal written format through Learning Stories or in informal forms as spontaneous responses to children's interests (MOE 2017).

Formative assessment

Formative assessment is grounded in the belief that every child can improve (Alasuutari, Markström, and Vallberg-Roth 2014). An assessment becomes a formative assessment when teachers utilise the information they gain from the assessment process to give feedback to students and feed back into the teaching process, with the aim of guiding students to perceive and achieve their next steps (Bell and Cowie 2001; Buchanan 2011; Carr and Lee 2019; Dunphy 2010; MOE 2017; Smith 2013; Wiliam 2011).

In NZ, the process of formative assessment involves both teachers and children reviewing and reflecting on assessment information. Children are encouraged to take part in the assessment process, set goals to themselves, and revisit their Learning Stories (Carr 2001).

Learning stories

A Learning Story is a narrative form of structured and documented observations written to the child and family, with the focus on the child's learning dispositions (Blaiklock

2013a; Lee et al. 2013). Through its collaborative approach, Learning Stories align with the holistic, sociocultural nature of Te Whāriki (Niles 2015). Learning Stories acknowledge the importance of family and parent involvement and provide a social space for all to contribute to assessment and curriculum (Buchanan 2011; Karlsdóttir and Garðarsdóttir 2010; Lee et al. 2013; Niles 2015). The narrative approach enables teachers, parents and children to construct learner identities and recreate selfhood as expressions of their culture (Carr and Lee 2012; Lee et al. 2013).

The process of noticing, recognising and responding are the steps that enable a narrative to develop in a Learning Story (Cameron 2014; Carr and Lee 2019). The 'recognising' or evaluation/analysis step in Learning Story-writing creates connection between the observed event and the learning; this transforms a descriptive story into a Learning Story (Carr and Lee 2019). Using Drummond's (2011) definition and placing it in a NZ ECE context, assessment reflects '[the] ways in which, in our everyday practice, we [children, families, teachers, and others] observe children's learning [notice], strive to understand it [recognise], and then put our understanding to good use [respond]' (MOE 2004, Book 1, 6).

In Learning Stories, children's learning episodes are discussed through the lens of learning dispositions, and described as achievements through a credit-based model. Recognising that children are taking an interest, being involved, persisting with difficulties, expressing ideas and feelings, and taking responsibilities, are key elements of the learning analysis. According to Carr (2001, 107), 'a credit focus is appropriate for formative assessment'. Learning Stories, as formative assessment, assess on two levels. On one level, the individual stories record and assess significant learning moments. On the other level, a collection of Learning Stories encompasses a bigger picture vision of the child and makes the growth and development of learning dispositions and competencies visible. Carr and Lee (2019) compare one Learning Story to a mosaic piece which is part of a big narrative made up from numerous stories.

The research reported on this paper adds to existing knowledge on this subject by focussing on the process of ECE assessment holistically, from the perspectives of well-regarded teachers.

Research questions

Given the importance of ECE assessment, we decided it was important to examine more closely the process and outcomes from Learning Story-writing by talking to well-respected ECE educators, known for their good work in this area. The study's intention was to help illuminate and raise awareness of the complexities of this assessment approach.

This study sets out to answer the following research questions:

(1) What is the role of the teacher in the use of Learning Stories in ECE assessment?
(2) What are the benefits of using Learning Stories in ECE?

Methodology

Taking a phenomenological approach, the study explored the participating teachers' everyday work experiences, and their lived and tested practices (Krauss 2005). The research aimed to allow the participants a voice to bring important characteristics of

the phenomena to light and they had the freedom to talk about and outline insights of their practical assessment experiences. During this, we were fully aware that a phenomenologist researcher cannot be separated from their own assumptions (Davison 2014). They bring themselves into the research (Finlay 2011), are present throughout the process, and develop a deep understanding of the phenomena while gaining self-awareness and self-knowledge (Henriksson 2012). Ethics approval was gained through a University process.

Participants

The study used purposeful sampling by inviting participation from those in early childhood centres known for high-quality practices. The aim was to recruit teachers who had a wide range of knowledge and experience. The participants were five ECE teachers: One kindergarten head teacher, one kindergarten teacher with head teaching experience, two centre managers who had active roles in the everyday teaching and assessment practices and one preschool head teacher from different regions of NZ. The study was interested in all of the participants' experiences, not just practices from their current workplace.

Method

The study used in-depth semi-structured individual interviews to collect qualitative data using open-ended questions such as 'In what ways do you collect information for assessment purposes?' The less structured approach allowed the interviewer (first author) the flexibility to rephrase questions, change order, or to ask extra unplanned questions to explore and clarify the teachers' responses. Using this approach sacrificed uniformity across all interviews in favour of a depth and richness of data, but because people's experiences were likely to be diverse, there was no reason to ask the same questions to everyone (Galletta 2016). Each participant was interviewed once during a four-month period, and the interview lasted around an hour. Three interviews were conducted face-to-face and two by internet call. They were all audio-recorded.

Data analysis

There is no one right way to conduct a phenomenological analysis. According to Finlay (2011), the researcher has the freedom to adjust the process and choose an approach which works for her. In the data analysis process for this study, the seven-step model outlined by Finlay (2011) was used alongside thematic analysis guidelines. The steps that were followed were:

(1) Reading and re-reading
(2) Initial coding
(3) Developing emerging themes
(4) Searching for connections across key points
(5) Bringing the cases together
(6) Looking for patterns across cases
(7) Taking interpretation to a deeper level

Findings and discussion

Below we describe and discuss the findings in two main sections. The first section focusses on the work of the teacher, and considers their role as emotional connector, researcher and author. The second section describes and discusses the nature and benefits of learning stories.

The teacher – the heart of Learning Story-writing

Firstly, the findings of this study underlined the importance of the teacher in the Learning Story-writing process. A strong dependency on teachers' professional knowledge, understanding and skills in data gathering, analysis and academic writing was found. This is in line with Carr and Lee (2019) who acknowledge the complexity of the Learning Story-writing process and the need for professional knowledge. According to the participants, each step of the Learning Story-writing can present challenges for teachers; an observation that is well documented in numerous research articles (Blaiklock 2011, 2013a, 2013b; Dunphy 2010; Loggenberg 2011; McLachlan 2018; Perkins 2013). According to Carr and Lee (2012), the validity of the assessment through Learning Stories depends on how well the child's learning is determined by a teacher and how well decisions are made to support the learning. As was found in this study, they argue that the teachers' professional judgement controls to what extent the collected information supports a specific interpretation and related decision.

Participants referred to Learning Stories as their dominant assessment documentation format. Photographs and children's portfolios were mentioned by all participants as assessment tools. This finding is similar to that in Mitchell's (2008) report, which states that 94% of teachers use Learning Stories as their main assessment tool in NZ. All of the teachers felt that Learning Stories were the most relevant, holistic and useful means to document children's learning. P3 shared a very strong opinion on using other assessment tools:

> We would not use anything else … There are people now who're doing individual developmental programmes for their children. I just cannot believe it. If you look at this it is. This form is that. Why would you bother to pull out small bits of information from the rich text, the rich narrative that Learning Stories provide. It is just accountability driven rubbish. … . I think over the years we understood how valuable [Learning Stories] are, for so many reasons. We are just so engaged with this work now; we just love it. You can talk to any of these teachers, and they would say that they are so in love with what happens. (P3)

P3's comments echo Reese et al.'s (2019) observation that practitioners in NZ ECE are deeply engaged in authoring and using Learning Stories.

Participants' comments highlighted that an ECE teacher has key roles in all aspects of ECE assessment. Accordingly, the Learning Story-writing process requires high levels of teacher competency and their ability to build deep emotional connection to the child, to observe and recognise the significant learning moment, and to articulate an important message about the child as a learner. These have been categorised as: teacher as an emotional connector, a researcher and an author.

The teacher as an emotional connector

Relationship-building with the child was in the participants' view, the most fundamental first step of their assessment practice, as explained by this teacher:

> When I first start doing Learning Stories on a child, the information I am collecting is more for me and for the parents to recognise that I am getting to know their child. As I get to know the child the relationship deepens, then I can write more formative Learning Stories about where I think the child is, especially after talking to their parents about what happens at home … That is a much more meaningful assessment. (P1)

Literature emphasises that relationships are the heart of early childhood pedagogy (McLaughlin, Aspden, and McLachlan 2015), central to quality assessment (Dunphy 2010; ERO 2011; Mitchell 2008) and one of the key principles of the NZ national ECE curriculum, Te Whāriki (MOE 2017). Profound adult–child, in our context teacher–child, relationship has been found to be necessary for intersubjectivity, which is the determinant that allows the teacher to deduce how much the child already understands and knows, and aids the teacher to scaffold the child's further development (Smith 1999).

As part of relationship-building, the participating teachers in this study emphasised the importance of spending long periods of time connecting and engaging with the child before starting any kind of assessment process, as described here by P3.

> We are emotionally connected. So, we are owning our biases … . We are there as a resource and we connect, and we love. We love our children. (P3)

McLaughlin, Aspden, and Snyder (2016) agree that the teachers' role in achieving this relationship is of primary significance and needs to be central to their daily work. This deep connection and holistic knowledge of the child allows teachers to recognise the right moment to document as a child's learning, so that it is significant for the child and relate to valued learning. Participants in this study also emphasised that a supportive environment that allows the teacher to achieve this emotional relationship is also paramount. A supportive environment, as McLaughlin, Aspden, and Snyder (2016) and ERO (2011) suggest, may include a shared understanding and value system in the ECE centre, the right teacher-to-child ratio and effective teamwork.

Consistent with research literature (McLaughlin, Aspden, and McLachlan 2015, 2016; Niles 2015), participants emphasised the importance of establishing strong trustful relationships with parents, involving them in the assessment process, and valuing their input and aspirations. Teachers used different ways to access parents' funds of knowledge including conversations, 'Getting to know me' sheets, parent questionnaires, teacher–parent meetings and interviews. As one participant explained:

> So really the korero [talking] with parents is the best way to get parent involvement. If you have written a story about a child, go and speak to a parent about it. Show them and talk to them about it, because then you can get a lot more information right there and then, that you can store in your brain and write it a little bit later. (P1)

The relationships built with parents and families enabled participants to utilise this family background information for a deeper, more holistic understanding of the child.

The teacher as a researcher

Participants agreed that the Learning Story-writing process could be approached as a small research project; research into the child's life and learning. Teachers' explanations

revealed a very thorough information-gathering process and manifested a strong emphasis on incorporating multiple perspectives into assessment, including the voices of children, parents and other teachers. This aspect illustrates that their practice aligned with McLachlan's (2018) claim that the revised Te Whāriki (MOE 2017) requires teachers to move away from the 'minute by minute' (MOE 1996, 26) observation method, to collect their information from multiple sources and to use formal and informal assessment to develop a clear, holistic picture about the child's learning. Teachers emphasised the significance of investing time and effort into their information-gathering which, they suggested, would make the assessment process meaningful and valid. They talked about a range of methods, for example:

> Observations … when observing my daily interactions with children … Using photographs … Taking notes of children's voices, any spoken word. Discussing with parents … getting some background information from them. Discussing with colleagues. Often, I would look back, previous stories, relating it, see if it's common themes. If it is a reoccurring theme. (P5)

Three teachers reported writing Learning Stories together with children, capturing their words and thinking about their own learning. P4 explains:

> What I am trying to do, especially with my four-year-old children, the ones that really can give you that feedback … before I finish the story on the laptop, I will bring it out and talk about it. Talk about what went on. I read the story to them, we talk about photos, and then I get their perspective on what learning was happening there. Often, I get them to name their story. So, right from the beginning … they have a real interest in that story. (P4)

Other methods to research the child's progress from a wider perspective included parental notes and encouragement of discussions at home. For example, P4 explained:

> I encourage parents to physically put stuff in so I might leave a gap in the story or ask a question … Sometimes I do what is called 'story snapshot'. I might take 6 photos of [children] doing something. They could take it home and I would say to the parent, 'This is what N. did today. Have a talk with him about it, have a look at each photo, how he responds, what he is doing'. That is very effective. (P4)

Participants also considered including their colleagues' voices and perspectives of children's learning in their assessment process as fundamental. P5 gave her opinion on the benefits of including different teacher voices in children's portfolios as follows:

> We are benefitting from each other's perspectives on the same child so the broad team focus gives a big picture, and the child can be advantaged by different teachers' skills and strengths supporting them in progressing their individual goal. In a strong team where relationships are good between teachers, I believe multi-voicing should be a positive thing, we are all communicating and collaboratively building a picture of that child's learning. (P5)

All teachers also mentioned using previously written Learning Stories as an information source in their role as 'researchers', given that different teachers may represent a different perspective on the child. Teachers reported that they used previous stories before they started writing their assessments so they could identify change, and to look for emerging similar themes and links in order to demonstrate continuity in children's learning and development, and this again emphasises their role as a researcher.

The teacher as an author

Participants argued that it is important to be emotionally invested in the writing process thoughtfully connecting the learning episode to the child before starting to write. The participants explained that noticing what is significant for the child requires teachers' thorough understanding of what valued learning is and why this significant moment matters. As explained by P1:

> When children are interested in something, they will do it more, therefore teachers can notice it more. The challenging part is that the learning and interest are not always in the same activity. It can manifest in different things with a similar theme that teachers need to notice. (P1)

P1's concerns about noticing and recognising what to write about aligns with the work of Perkins (2013) and Loggenberg (2011) who suggest that knowing what learning to notice during observations is a problematic area for teachers. Loggenberg's (2011) study showed that a significantly low percentage of teachers felt confident in this aspect of Learning Story-writing.

In addition, the participants felt teachers need to have the right skills and ample time to articulate the significant moment they have noticed in writing, with the child in mind, threading that close emotional connection through the story. In the following quote, we can feel the frustration that a lack of time brings.

> Sometimes it can be a challenge just to articulate what magical moment you have just seen. That takes a lot of language, a lot of writing … And time. Ahh, it would be great to have so much more time to write them. (P2)

This finding echoes the work of Cameron, McLachlan, and Rawlins (2016) who state that time for story-writing, is a significant factor contributing to the quality of assessment. They found that lack of time can put pressure on teachers as authors, and cause them stress.

Teachers need to spend time on analysing and synthesising the collected data to make their writing credible. As illustrated in the following quote, the participants felt that photographs were not enough on their own:

> Photographs help children to be able to 'read' their stories. Photographs are important. But anybody who thinks that you can get away in terms of assessment having some photos and some captions on those photos is not a professional teacher. That is a shortcut to nothing. (P3)

Teachers in this study commented that they all followed the 'notice, recognise, respond' format when writing their Learning Stories. Participants emphasised the importance of the analysis part of the story and reinforced that this is the crucial element within their writing that made the recognised learning behind the observed experience visible. Their explanation confirmed Carr and Lee's (2019) notion that analysis makes the connection between the observed experience and the child's learning, and changes the story into a Learning Story. The quote below from P4 shows that reflection on and interpretation of an episode was needed to link the event to the dispositions that are developing for the child.

> I would do a story and would reflect on what learning is in that story. Why that learning is valid. Why it is worthwhile to write about. What my interpretation of that, the learning that

> is going on is visible. It is not so much about the experience; this is the disposition we are really trying to build. (P4)

Participants' comments highlighted their belief that teachers' understanding of learning dispositions and their ability to link them to children's observed experiences are crucial in Learning Story-writing, although this can be very challenging. Carr (2001) describes the underlying dispositional learning as complex and elusive. Claxton and Carr (2004) acknowledge that while it is important to focus on children's developing dispositions in ECE assessment, teachers are faced with the difficulty to determine which disposition to name and assess and how to track these. In their review, ERO found that teachers' assessment records often focused on children's participation in activities and described enjoyment rather than learning. It was noted as alarming that 50% of teachers' Learning Stories contained inadequate evidence of children's learning. Blaiklock (2013b) argues that the demand placed on teachers to assess dispositions unfair. He states that the reason teachers struggle with this practice is that this area is poorly investigated and not clearly defined.

The participating teachers in this study understood that there is a huge diversity in teachers' writing skills. They commented that some teachers' stories can be very light weight, and some are very deep. P5 noted that 'to set a benchmark of quality is very difficult'. Participants considered supporting teachers who struggle with Learning Story-writing as an important part of their practice, but they also found it quite challenging. Teachers acknowledged that newly graduated and provisionally registered teachers needed extensive time, support and mentoring in Learning Story-writing. This finding mirrors that of Niles (2015) and Loggenberg's (2011) research which state that teachers gain their training in story-writing mainly from their colleagues once they are working.

In spite of the challenges, the participating teachers explained that they were very satisfied with their role as authors using the Learning Story format. Their commentary revealed an enthusiastic, fervent and passionate disposition towards this current assessment approach, in ways similar to that found by Buchanan (2011) and Smith (2007). Smith (2007, 5) states that narrative assessments 'have the power to excite and energise teachers, parents and children'. This study also found that if teachers are well-resourced with the necessary skills and time for Learning Story-writing the assessment information from the well-written stories can be utilised in many ways which can benefit children, parents, teachers and the teaching team.

Benefits of Learning Stories

The participants in this study described the benefits of the Learning Story approach and emphasised that: 'Learning is not black and white in ECE' (P2). Learning Stories were seen to allow teachers to assume, guess what is going on behind the observed activity, use tentative language to describe children's experiences and have room for subjectivity. Teachers explained that through Learning Stories, teachers can tell a story, analyse it and blend these two elements together to help children internalise who they are as learners.

Teachers in this study clearly articulated that Learning Stories are formative assessment tools and information must be utilised from them. For example, P4 talks about the ongoing nature and use of Learning Stories in the following quote:

> It's making sure that those Learning Stories are not just printed and put in their book and not discussed with children … They are living documents and get talked about. And go back to them. (P4)

The nature of Learning Stories as described by the participants is consistent with a wide range of national literature (Bell and Cowie 2001; Buchanan 2011; Carr and Lee 2019; MOE 2017; Smith 2013) and international literature (Dunphy 2010; Wiliam 2011) which explains that assessment becomes formative when the assessment information is utilised by actions that support learning, give feedback and feed information back into the teaching process. Findings revealed four interesting purposes of Learning Stories that benefit children, parents and teachers, discussed below.

Mana atua – well-being – improving children's well-being

Teachers believed that credit-based Learning Stories could lead to beneficial outcomes by being a positive influence on children's actions and behaviour. They felt that documenting children's stories when they were succeeding, reminding them of their positive experiences through the photographs and reading the credit-based stories over and over again could positively influence children's social competence. P3 recounts using Learning Stories for this reason in the following quote:

> When a child is struggling with being kind, we will write a story about them when they are kind and we will reread those stories, remind them 'Look at this story, you remember when your friend J. was having trouble and you did this?' Oh my gosh this made our heart sing. So that's why listening to these Learning Stories is such a fabulous thing. (P3)

Dunn's (2004) explanation of the advantages of Learning Stories in early intervention aligned with the participants' beliefs. Dunn highlights that the information in the stories is collected in a natural context in familiar settings during meaningful activities; the stories describe the environment and the social context. The information is interpreted by people who know the child well and the focus is on the child's strengths. Participants explained that stories have the potential to build children's self-esteem and well-being by allowing children to see themselves achieving their goals and hearing encouraging language through having their stories read to them. According to the participants, sharing these success stories with parents can positively affect parent involvement in the assessment process.

Reese et al.'s (2019) study is consistent with the findings of this study. They found that the presence of children's interwoven personal experiences makes Learning Stories more appealing for children, and more effective for learning than commercially available picture books. The effectiveness of Learning Stories relates to the fact that the child is the centre of focus, the main character of the stories, and children are very interested in personal narratives. Reese et al. (2019, 12) also add that the one-on-one teacher–child interactions with Learning Stories can strongly support children's language development, and 'propose that sharing Learning Stories in dyadic interactions is a complementary form of interaction over and above the assessment purposes of learning stories'.

Mana aotūroa – exploration – teachers exploring each other's stories

The common practice of teachers reading Learning Stories written by others was revealed as an imperative part of the assessment process, and an unwritten expectation for

teachers. Revisiting and reading each other's Learning Stories was incorporated in teachers' non-contact times, in shared proof-reading routines or as part of their everyday practice with children. The following quotes are typical of the comments made regarding the reading of Learning Stories:

> You want to read what everyone has written beforehand. Before you write a story. … It helps everybody to stay connected and grow our knowledge of that child, which is the most important thing. (P2)

In support of this practice, Carr and Lee (2019) argue that time allocated for teachers to read stories is crucial.

Participants believed the practice of exploring Learning Stories written by others helped them find important information about children's previous experiences and deepened their understanding and knowledge about children through the perspectives of other teachers. Through this exploration, they were able to identify emerging themes, make links between stories and achieve continuity in documenting children's progress. The participants' beliefs align with Carr and Lee's (2019) explanation that one Learning Story which only assesses a particular moment, is only a piece of a big mosaic. The participants explained that revisiting a collection of stories enables the teacher to assess the big picture and show the child's growth and development in learning dispositions over time.

Mana reo – communication – the importance of teacher talks

It was evident that all participants discussed children and Learning Stories during staff meetings and used a collection of stories to make decisions about children's future learning goals. For example, in the following quote, P3 described the collaborative nature of the communication and planning, and their focus on developing a learning environment that suits the child:

> We share these stories together at team meetings where we can have a more team-based discussion about what we think is happening here for this child. But also, for the building of the environment that enables him to do this. We want to make sure that we are designing the environment for learning. That we have a learning focused culture; that teaching and learning here is very focused on individually wrapping that mātauranga around each child. (P3)

Although there were differences across ECE Centres, all participants discussed individual children at meetings and planned collaboratively. Teachers' comments highlighted the importance of high-level teamwork and great communication among staff members for planning. Teachers made sure that everybody in the team understood the child's learning goals and needs. Carr and Lee (2019) support this practice stating that sharing Learning Stories and discussing each other's stories are critical. Cherrington (2012) adds that teachers' regular collaborative dialogue is paramount for ongoing professional reflections and critique of practices.

Mana tangata – contribution – learning from each other

The utilisation of Learning Stories as a professional developmental tool to contribute to teachers' development was another interesting finding in this study. Teachers described using Learning Stories to learning from each other, developing their story-writing skills

as part of their professional practice. Participants' comments align with Niles (2015) and Loggenberg's (2011) work, highlighting that teachers mainly gain knowledge in Learning Story-writing from their colleagues. Teachers described giving constructive feedback to each other about their writing and using other teachers' stories as examples of effective ways to articulate significant moments in children's learning.

By revisiting teachers' stories at the beginning and the end of the year, teachers in leadership positions can measure progress in their teachers' writing skills. Participants explained that they gave feedback to improve the quality of the stories but encouraged teachers to keep their own writing style. In their settings, teachers were encouraged to give ongoing feedback to each other about their stories. The following quotes illustrate the contributions that come from reading and writing Learning Stories:

> We are learning from each other by reading each other's stories … by giving each other feedback … It is very important to learn from our colleagues and read their stories, and it is such a deep and effective way to do this. (P3)

Three participants mentioned writing Learning Stories about student teachers as a very effective way of giving feedback, as P4 explained:

> I have found it very good with students. Especially if you want to give them a particular feedback on something that they need to improve on. Because you can talk about the good things that are happening and then just note things they could be doing or change. I find it really really helpful. Positive … not confrontational. A positive way of giving feedback. (P4)

This practice of assessment sharing can contribute to a high-functioning team environment by fostering positive relationships among staff members, encouraging teachers to communicate well, be open for critique and be confident in their ability to receive and give feedback (ERO 2011; McLaughlin, Aspden, and McLachlan 2015).

Implications and limitations

An implication from this study is the importance of teacher knowledge. Investigation into whether teachers receive adequate preparation for professionally demanding and complex assessment practices is important, and ECE providers need to make sure teachers have the requisite theoretical and practical expertise. Professional learning in this area needs to be prioritised, as developing this complex set of skills is important for all teachers.

The study highlighted benefits of teachers reading each other's stories, and encourages centres to develop a team culture where critiquing, commenting on and using Learning Stories to learn from each other is a widely accepted and appreciated practice. Furthermore, the use of credit-based Learning Stories for motivating children is a practice evident in the study and this could be encouraged more widely.

Limitations

This was a small qualitative study involving five ECE teachers who work in New Zealand. Its aim was to give rich, in-depth accounts of their experiences of assessment. Findings cannot necessarily be generalised, nonetheless, readers of this study are able to consider

the findings and whether they may or may not be transferred to their own contexts (Bryman 2001).

Conclusion

The findings revealed a highly complex assessment process through the use of Learning Stories and highlighted the key roles of teachers and its high dependency on teachers' understanding and competencies in the narrative assessment format. The challenges teachers identified in Learning Story-writing included the process of noticing, recognising and articulating a significant learning moment, understanding the value of the observed experience, and recognising the dispositional learning which underlines its significance. Strengthening teachers' competencies in assessment practices is a crucial factor in making interpretations and meaningful actions valid.

Research findings clearly show that the participating teachers were able to utilise Learning Stories in a wide range of ways. Learning Stories were shown to have a great potential in positively influencing children's social competence, promoting children's self-esteem, sharing information with colleagues and improving teachers' learning story-writing skills.

The study highlighted implications for addressing the identified challenges acknowledging the limitations and encouraged teachers to incorporate the identified practical ideas in their practice with the aim of increasing the effectiveness of the utilisation of Learning Stories in their practice.

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