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**The Use of Learning Stories as Assessment  
in Primary Schools**

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree  
of  
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# Abstract

New Zealand primary school teachers have shown interest in implementing *learning through play* programmes, and alongside this developing teaching pedagogy teachers are seeking an assessment method that appropriately aligns with the holistic nature of play. Learning Stories, commonly used in New Zealand Early Childhood Education settings (Mitchell, 2008), are formative assessment documents used to assess observed learning during play. Some primary school teachers with learning through play programmes have also started using Learning Stories to assess learning and progress of students.

Using a Sociocultural lens, this qualitative research explored how teachers from three New Zealand primary schools are using Learning Stories assessment. Undertaken as an appreciative inquiry, this research, grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, used a multiple case study approach, collecting evidence through semi-structured interviews and gathering relevant documentation to investigate how the participant teachers from three case study primary schools were using Learning Stories.

The research provides an insight into the participants' views about the use of Learning Stories in their primary school settings. There is little existing research about the use of Learning Stories in primary schools and this research provides interested educators with some of the benefits for using Learning Stories in a primary school context. Key findings within this research indicate that Learning Stories are an effective way to assess both dispositional and academic progress, for highlighting learner strengths, and providing a framework to assess progress over time.

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# List of Terms

<b>Ākongā</b>	Māori word meaning learner (Biggs, 1990)
<b>Junior Classes, Junior School, Junior Team</b>	The names commonly given to the classes of children in their first two years of primary school. Sometimes also referred to by the Year level: Eg., Year 0 – 2
<b>Kāhui Ako</b>	A localised group of New Zealand schools working together to help students achieve their educational potential (Ministry of Education, 2021)
<b>Kaiako</b>	Māori word meaning teacher (Biggs, 1990)
<b>Learning Areas</b>	The eight distinct subject areas as identified in the New Zealand Curriculum: English, the arts, health and physical education, learning languages, mathematics and statistics, science, social sciences, and technology (Ministry of Education, 2007)
<b>Learning through play</b>	Play experiences in an educational setting (Early Childhood or Primary School), with an acknowledgement that open-ended play leads to learning (National Playing Fields Association, 2000)
<b>Mana</b>	Māori word meaning prestige or influence (Biggs, 1990)
<b>New Entrant</b>	The name given to the class for children when they first start at primary school. Sometimes also referred to as Year 0
<b>Play-based learning</b>	A term used interchangeably with <i>learning through play</i> (see above)
<b>Portfolio</b>	In the context of this research, a portfolio is a folder used to collate Learning Stories together so that they can be read consecutively
<b>Scale A</b>	The designation given to a primary school teacher who has no leadership responsibilities additional to their teaching role
<b>Seesaw</b>	An online sharing application where teachers and parents can communicate and share information about a student's learning
<b>Team Leader</b>	Teacher with leadership responsibilities in a school
<b>Urges</b>	Universal play patterns that are observed when a child is playing. Eg: transformation, trajectory, enclosure, climbing, patterning, water play, digging etc. (Brownlee & Crisp, 2016)
<b>Whānau</b>	Māori word meaning family, or extended family (Biggs, 1990)

# Chapter One: Introduction

In this research I aim to examine the use of Learning Stories by teachers in three New Zealand primary schools. All three participant schools in this study were implementing learning through play programmes in their junior classes and the junior school teachers were using Learning Stories to assess some of the observed learning during play-based learning times. Participating teachers shared their views and experiences about their use of Learning Stories. This chapter begins with explaining the 'backstory' to this research: how the recent educational landscape in New Zealand has led to the use of Learning Stories by some primary school teachers in their assessment practice. This chapter also provides an overview of the researcher's own backstory and outlines the research aims and research question, concluding with an overview of this thesis.

## The Backstory to This Research

Historically in New Zealand play was a feature of junior primary school classrooms. In the 1940s and 1950s New Zealand was regarded as an international leader in play-based classrooms. Primary school 'infant classes' (for learners aged 5-7) were centred around children's play, where children played freely in 'home corners' with dolls, and with blocks, art materials and carpentry tables (Davis, 2018; NZ National Film Unit, 1950). In the 1970's and 1980's play continued to be the norm in New Zealand junior primary school classrooms. Play was labelled Developmental Time (Davis, 2018), where children were free to choose from play-based activities and play was seen as a developmentally-appropriate way for young children to learn.

Since the 1990s, time for play in junior primary school classrooms has been steadily eroded. A 'culture of performativity' has dominated New Zealand primary and secondary schools for several decades, with increasing levels of external monitoring and political interference impacting on the curriculum taught in primary schools (Lee & Lee 2015). Pressures of academic accountability and political agendas have meant that in recent years play at school has been relegated to break times, or as a rare treat (Gronlund, 2010). The belief that there is valuable learning to be gained while children play was lost in a groundswell of the need for teachers to show students' academic progress and achievement.

Academic accountability in the name of National Standards was introduced to New Zealand primary schools in 2008 (Thrupp, 2018). Under National Standards, teachers reported on children's academic progress in reading, writing and maths twice yearly, labelling children on a scale of 'well below' – 'above', against the expected Standard for the child's time at school. Due to perceived pressure by teachers to show children's academic progress through National Standards data, there was a narrowing of the curriculum towards more reading, writing and maths, to the detriment of

broader curriculum coverage (Lee & Lee, 2015; Thrupp, 2018). In primary schools, teachers taught more literacy and numeracy and fewer subjects such as creative arts and physical education in order to get children 'up to Standard'.

Some New Zealand primary school teachers felt increasingly uncomfortable about the pressure National Standards expectations put on children to achieve and they felt disillusioned when labelling children against arbitrary Standards (Maguire, 2018). This dissatisfaction led to some primary school teachers re-evaluating the ways that they teach and the abolishment of National Standards in 2017 enabled teachers greater freedom to address how they teach and how they assess, with some teachers re-focusing their teaching and assessment practice to give value to a broader curriculum. Some teachers began focusing on a wider curriculum, prioritising the social-emotional development and dispositional growth of their students alongside their academic progress. Some junior teachers began implementing play-based learning programmes and the interest by teachers in how children can learn through play has rapidly grown (Collins, 2018). More and more New Zealand primary school teachers are valuing a learning through play approach to education.

Alongside this pedagogical shift towards teaching and learning through play, some primary school teachers have looked for an assessment method that appropriately aligns with their play-based pedagogy. Looking to Early Childhood Education (ECE) for guidance, some teachers have started using Learning Stories to assess and document some of the learning they have observed during children's play. Originally designed to assess learning in ECE settings (Carr, 2001; Carr et al., 1998), the ability to assess children's holistic progress in a way that highlights children's strengths has meant that Learning Stories align well with the play-based pedagogy developed by some New Zealand primary school teachers. Therefore, it is timely that this research is undertaken, investigating the use of Learning Stories in primary schools.

### The Researcher's Backstory

Like many New Zealand primary school teachers, the perceived pressure of "having my students reading at 'green level'" [the reading National Standard for after one year of school] when they turned six did not sit comfortably with me. So, like other New Zealand junior school teachers, I sought an approach to teaching and assessment that valued the diverse strengths and skills of each learner: where every child has their strengths and interests acknowledged and nurtured. In the words of Robinson and Aronica (2015), "many highly talented, brilliant people think they're not because the thing they were good at in school wasn't valued" (p. vxiii). As a teacher I wanted to value the diverse strengths every child brought with them to school - even those talents that don't traditionally shine through in an educational culture where literacy and numeracy achievement is

prioritised. And so began my journey to teach in a way that celebrated and valued the diverse strengths of every learner.

My teaching team and I began implementing a learning through play programme in 2014. This was a journey of discovery, over time coming to understand the value of teaching and learning through play. Our play-based learning programme needed a way to meaningfully assess the learning we were observing. Because one of the teachers in my team was ECE-trained, we turned to her for guidance and began writing Learning Stories. Learning Stories enabled us to assess and document some of the learning we were noticing in children's play. My experience as a teacher using Learning Stories in my primary school classroom led me to wonder whether other primary school teachers were also using Learning Stories. This was ultimately the catalyst for this research, investigating how primary school teachers are using Learning Stories in their assessment practice.

### The Aims of This Research

This research aimed to investigate the question, "How are primary school teachers using Learning Stories in their assessment practice?" through a multiple case study design. It is my aim that the findings of this research will support other primary school teachers who may be interested in implementing Learning Stories as an assessment. The use of Learning Stories in primary schools is a relatively new phenomenon, with little existing research. Recent direction from the Ministry of Education (MoE) in the *Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities* (NELP) indicates that New Zealand schools should "identify and respond to learner/ākonga strengths, progress and needs" (MoE, 2020a, p. 4). I see Learning Stories as having the potential to address this objective, and I hope that this research may support educators to see the value of Learning Stories as a way to identify and respond to learner strengths and progress.

### An Overview of This Thesis

This thesis is organised into six chapters. This chapter has introduced the research, providing background information and the research aims. Chapter Two examines the relevant literature for this research, outlining formative assessment, Learning Stories and learning through play in a primary school context. Chapter Three describes the theoretical approach to this research, describing the influence of Sociocultural Theory, as well as the research approach and ethical considerations. Chapter Four presents the findings of this research, outlining key characteristics of each case study school as well as common attributes across all participant schools, along with some constraints these schools highlighted in their use of Learning Stories. Chapter Five provides a discussion about the findings of this research and Chapter Six concludes with an outline of limitations of this research, recommendations for future research and some final thoughts.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of the relevant literature and research relating to Learning Stories and learning through play in primary schools. It includes an outline of assessment for formative purposes and explains how Learning Stories can support teacher practice and develop student assessment capabilities. This chapter also reviews relevant literature about play, learning through play, and learning through play in a New Zealand primary school context.

### Assessment for Formative Purposes

Educators use assessment to gather evidence about students and to make judgements about students' learning. Assessment can have a direct impact on how and what a student learns and encourage effective teaching, therefore assessment has a central place in teaching and learning (Hill, 2019; Wiliam, 2008). Assessment is complex and can take many forms (Swaffield, 2008) and it can fulfil a variety of different purposes.

Stobart (2008, p. 16) groups the varied purposes of assessment into three categories:

1. Selection and certification
2. Determining and raising standards
3. Formative assessment – assessment for learning

Assessment is undertaken for a range of reasons and assessment data can be used for both summative and formative purposes.

Assessment for formative purposes occurs when assessment information is used by teachers and students in a manner that leads to a modification of future teaching and learning activities (Wiliam, 2011). Formative assessment evidence is used by the teacher to modify their teaching and by students to help them understand their strengths and next steps.

For the purpose of this thesis, I will use the definition of Black and Wiliam (2009) to define what makes assessment *formative*:

Practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited. (p. 9)

Consistent with Black and Wiliam's definition, Harlen (2008) argues that the purpose of formative assessment is to help teachers and learners formulate further learning steps. With formative

assessment, a summative grade or level is not given. Instead, the judgement the teacher and/or student makes based on the formal or informal evidence is about which next steps in learning are needed. If an assessment does not help encourage future learning, then it is not formative assessment.

According to the New Zealand Ministry of Education (MoE) the primary purpose of assessment is to gather formative assessment evidence. The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) states that the “primary purpose of assessment is to improve students’ learning and teachers’ teaching as both student and teacher respond to the information that it provides” (MoE, 2007, p. 39). Assessment information should provide evidence that supports the teacher to adjust their teaching to better cater for the students’ next learning steps. Wiliam (2011) explains this well, stating that effective formative assessment occurs when “evidence of learning is used to adjust instruction to better meet student needs” (p. 46). When a learner or a teacher responds to information gathered in an assessment by altering their practice of learning and teaching, it is formative by nature.

According to Drummond (2012, p. 12) effective formative assessment is “a process in which our understanding of children’s learning, acquired through observation and reflection, can be used to evaluate and enrich the curriculum we offer.” Effective assessment requires the teacher to observe students’ learning and reflect on what they notice. Drummond repeatedly refers to this as a *process*. Assessment for formative purposes is a continual process. When teaching lessons, teachers will be observing learners and reflecting on what they see, leading to the teacher adapting future teaching. Wylie et al. (2012) also identify formative assessment as an on-going process, stating that teachers must continually adapt lessons as additional formative assessment information is gathered. Teachers must take time to reflect on observed learning (or observed incorrect responses to tasks) then alter their teaching to better cater for the individual’s next steps in learning. Formative assessment leads to the teacher and the learner both understanding the learner’s strengths, successes and next learning steps. Assessment for formative purposes should provide feedback on the learning process for the individual student.

Formative assessment is not used to compare students. Black and Wiliam (1998) argue that making comparisons between students is not justified in formative assessment practice. Rather, judgements are made about the individual’s progress and that progress may vary between students. Harlen (2008) agrees, explaining that feedback to individuals should be about their own unique work, and should avoid comparisons with other students. The literature indicates that assessment for formative purposes can help the individual come to understand their own learning progress and next steps (Absolum et al., 2009; Bell & Cowie, 1997; Clarke et al., 2001; Wiliam, 2011; Wylie et al., 2012).

Teachers and students can use formative assessment evidence to identify a learner's strengths and use this information to plan for further learning. Therefore, formative assessment can help shape how students see themselves as learners. Absolum et al. (2009) state that "young people should be educated in ways that support them to assume control of their own learning and that they can only do this if they develop the capability to assess their own learning" (p. 19). By being involved in formative assessment, students become better able to use assessment information to help understand themselves as learners and further their learning.

The idea that students should be involved in their own formative assessment was discussed in 1999 by the Assessment Reform Group - a group of seven British academics with a focus on researching assessment policy issues in the United Kingdom. The Assessment Reform Group argued that although teachers will be involved in gathering formative information, ultimately it is the students who will take the next learning steps. Therefore, students must be involved in decisions about their work. The more students are involved in the formative assessment process, the more likely it is that the assessment will lead to further learning.

The term *self-assessment* is commonly used when discussing ways learners can be involved in assessing their own learning progress (Absolum, 2011; Black & Wiliam, 1998; MoE, 2004b, 2011; Stiggins, 2005; Wiliam, 2011). Black and Wiliam (1998) state that self-assessment is an essential part of formative assessment. By being involved in self-assessment, the student is required "to consciously examine what they did against to what they were trying to do" (Absolum, 2011). This means that students are fully involved in the formative assessment process and are made aware of what they need to do to further their learning. Teachers have an important role in self-assessment. Teachers must provide support that fosters student ability to self-assess meaningfully in order to understand their next learning steps (Absolum et al., 2009; Earl & Katz, 2008). Part of the teacher's role in formative assessment is to support the student in developing their assessment capabilities.

#### A Formative Assessment Cycle

In New Zealand, Bell and Cowie (1997, 2001a, 2001b; Cowie & Bell, 1999) undertook a two year research project into formative assessment in Year 7-10 science classrooms. Their research involved eight case studies of ten teachers and their classes. Cowie and Bell defined two different types of formative assessments occurring in the case study classrooms: *planned* formative assessment and *interactive* formative assessment. Planned formative assessment involves teachers "eliciting, interpreting and acting on assessment information" (1999, p. 103). According to Cowie and Bell's research, interactive formative assessment "took place during student-teacher interactions" (1999, p. 107). Interactive formative assessment, as identified by the researchers, was not pre-planned, but arose out of a learning activity. Interactive formative assessment can take place at any time there is



student-teacher interaction. Bell and Cowie describe these interactions as involving the teachers “noticing, recognising and responding to student thinking” (1997, p. 302). This *noticing, recognising* and *responding* is a formative assessment cycle that was developed during Bell and Cowie’s research.

*Noticing* involves observing the student, as well as looking at any written evidence produced by the student (Bell & Cowie, 1997). Teachers may also notice personal or social development. Bell and Cowie state that the noticing of teachers with interactive formative assessment is ephemeral; information captured is in a moment that may be either verbal or non-verbal. During their research, Bell and Cowie noted that teachers observed students working on science tasks and they observed the students’ interactions with others. The authors acknowledged that teachers observed different things about different students at different times and noticed more about some students than others.

*Recognising* involves teachers understanding the significance of their observations (Cowie & Bell, 1999). Cowie and Bell argue that it is possible for teachers to notice a student’s work, without recognising the significance of learning. The authors decided that the key to recognising the potential for further learning from an observation is the teacher understanding “its significance for the development of the student’s personal, social or science understandings” (Cowie & Bell, 1999, p. 109). Cowie and Bell note that the ability for teachers to recognise the significance of observations is dependent on the teacher’s pedagogical knowledge and experience. Inexperienced teachers and teachers with a new class found it more difficult to recognise the significance of their observations.

*Responding* involves the teacher responding to what has been noticed and recognised (Bell & Cowie, 1997). The authors explain that this part of interactive formative assessment is similar to planned formative assessment except the timeframe is more immediate. Teachers need to make quick decisions within the process of interactive formative assessment. A response by teachers in their study was likely to contain elements of care as well as subject – in their case, science - content. Some responses that the researchers reported included teachers changing from working with a small group to talking to the whole class, deliberately eliciting information from students, and repeating explanations or activities.

Interactive formative assessment, as Bell and Cowie (1997) define their term, allows teachers to focus on the whole child, not just specific subject knowledge. Interactive formative assessment encompasses all aspects of a student’s learning: their personal, social and subject knowledge development (Bell & Cowie, 1997). Teachers in Cowie and Bell’s research highlighted the importance of relationships within their teaching and said that they ensured their responses to

students would not damage their relationship with the learner, or the learner's view of the subject matter (1999). The teachers used the personal, social, and subject-based knowledge they gained about a student over time to build their understanding of the learner. As this understanding of the learner grew over time with additional formative observations, teachers were increasingly able to cater to their personal, social, and subject-based needs.

The research by Bell and Cowie (1997, 2001a, 2001b; Cowie & Bell, 1999) into formative assessment practices in science classrooms has impacted the formative assessment practices of New Zealand Early Childhood Education (ECE) and primary school teachers. The importance of formative assessment practice in New Zealand educational settings is outlined in the literature (see for example, Absolum, 2011; Absolum et al., 2009; Clarke et al., 2001; Crooks, 2011; Hill, 2019; MoE, 2011). The MoE outline that schools and ECE providers should have formative assessment practices embedded in teacher practice. There are a variety of different formative assessment methods used in New Zealand schools and ECE settings. In primary schools, teachers commonly use a mixture of conversations, observations, quizzes and tests in their assessment practice (Hill, 2019). In ECE settings learning is predominantly through play, and the most common formative assessment used to assess the learning during play is Learning Stories. In 2007, 94% of ECE teachers were using Learning Stories in their assessment practice (Mitchell, 2008). Recently, there have been some primary school teachers who are also beginning to use Learning Stories (Davis et al., 2013; MoE, 2009, O'Neil, 2018; Smith et al., 2011). Learning Stories have been most popular with junior school teachers and those who are implementing learning through play programmes.

### [Learning Stories as Formative Assessment](#)

Learning Stories were developed in New Zealand in the late 1990's by Professor Margaret Carr as a way to assess learning progress within ECE settings (Carr, 2001; Carr et al., 1998). Carr (2001) explains that Learning Stories are formative assessment because they contribute to children's progress and further learning. The aim for Learning Stories is to "push the learning forward, and expand it, not just to describe an event" (Carr & Lee, 2019, p. 14). Learning Stories document feedback on children's learning in a way that can encourage and strengthen a child's learning journey and support learning progress.

There are three main parts to a Learning Story: a narrative of the observed learning, an analysis of the learning, and planning for possible future learning (Sands, 2017). These three parts align with the three parts to the interactive formative assessment cycle of notice (learning narrative) – recognise (analysis) – respond (future planning), as designed by Cowie and Bell (1999). When teachers write Learning Stories they include the notice-recognise-respond elements within the

document. Each section has a specific purpose. These three elements of Cowie and Bell's cycle have been adapted here to explain the process of Learning Stories.

### *Noticing*

The noticing section of a Learning Story is usually written in a narrative style as a story to the child (Carr, 2001; Carr & Lee, 2019; Niles, 2015). There are often accompanying photos that illustrate what a teacher has observed during a child's play, exploration or social interaction. This section usually includes a description of the learning environment or the learning context (Wanoa & Johnston, 2019). The narrative places the child at the centre of the learning, with thoughts and feelings entwined in the story (Hazard, 2011). Learning Stories aim to engage readers, making the learning visible and providing readers with a rich understanding of the context of the learning episode.

The Learning Story narrative should reflect children's learning within the unique social context that the learning occurred. Cowie and Carr (2017) state that a Learning Story "belongs to and is embedded in a particular context – national and local community, families, school, and early childhood centre" (p. 1497). These authors believe that a child's learning is not separate from their interactions with their community, the environment, and the people in it. Therefore, in the noticing section, a Learning Story should acknowledge the environment in which the child is learning, drawing the reader's attention to any relevant historical context.

### *Recognising*

The recognising section of a Learning Story provides an analysis of the learning that is recorded in the Learning Story's noticing section. Lee (2019) explains that it is recognising the learning that makes the Learning Story a formative assessment. Learning Stories should highlight "episodes of achievement" (Carr, 2001, p. 107). The Learning Story author reflects on the observed learning and explains the significance of the child's learning and progress in this section. Wanoa and Johnston (2019) state that the recognising section usually is written in the teacher's voice, describing what the teacher identifies as the child's learning and progress.

The teacher's analysis of the learning is written from what is known as a *credit-based* (Carr, 2001; Hatherly & Sands, 2002), or *strengths-based* (Karlisdóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2010; MoE, 2004c) approach. A credit- or strengths-based approach to assessment focuses on what a child *can* do, rather than what they cannot yet do. Hatherly and Sands (2002) argue that the strengths-based approach of Learning Stories is more likely to lead to further learning for the child than deficit approaches to assessment because students are more likely to engage in learning experiences when these experiences are designed from students' strengths and interests.

### Responding

The responding section of a Learning Story suggests possible future actions or ideas of how to further the child's learning. This section is often called *opportunities and possibilities* (Lee et al., 2013), *next steps* (Cameron et al., 2016; Carr & Lee, 2019) or *further learning opportunities* (Sands, 2017). Possible future actions in this section are suggestions to extend the child's learning. Suggested next steps will usually include activities that align with a child's interests, capabilities and areas of strength (Zhang, 2017). However, the 'next steps' section may not always have a specific activity to extend learning. The MoE (2004c), acknowledging the complexity of learning in ECE and play-based learning contexts, states that the term formative assessment implies that teachers will "know what an appropriate next step might be, and for complex learning, we don't always know" (p. 14). In the responding section of a Learning Story, the author will suggest *possible* ways that the learning may be extended. Carr and Lee (2019) acknowledge the ambiguity and uncertainty that can be present for teachers when they attempt to recognise and respond to play observations. Carr and Lee suggest teachers embrace this ambiguity and understand that suggested next steps are only possible pathways for future learning.

Learning Stories provide a framework for both ECE and primary school teachers to notice, recognise, and respond formatively to observed learning in their classrooms. Learning Stories have the potential to have a positive impact on teacher practice, providing a way for teachers to assess students holistically from a strengths-based approach.

### Learning Stories and Teacher Practice

Learning Stories were designed and implemented following the release of the New Zealand ECE curriculum, Te Whāriki (MoE, 1996). Carr et al. (1998) stated that "a different curriculum calls for a different approach to assessment" (p. 2). Teachers required an assessment methodology that aligned with the Sociocultural approach of Te Whāriki and Carr "wanted to seize the notion of assessment, shake it around a bit, turn it upside down and find something that was part of enjoying the company of young children" (2001, p. x). Learning Stories can support teachers to assess children's learning in a way that illustrates the teacher's enjoyment of working with children and make valued learning visible. Although Learning Stories were designed for ECE teachers to assess Te Whāriki, they can also be written by primary school teachers who want a strengths-based approach to assessing learner progress.

### Learning Stories and their Alignment with Te Whāriki and Sociocultural Theory

Te Whāriki (MoE, 1996, 2017) is embedded in Sociocultural Theory (Carr & Lee, 2012; Lee et al., 2013; MoE, 2004a, 2017) and Carr developed Learning Stories to align with the Sociocultural Theoretical perspective of Te Whāriki (Carr, 2001; Lee et al., 2013). Sociocultural Theory views

learning as occurring alongside others and influenced by the environment and those within it. Fleer (2010) describes how Socioculturally-grounded assessment “seeks to capture the whole dynamic interactions associated with a performance as it is enacted by a child, a group of children or as adults interacting with children (or vice versa)” (p. 200). Learning Stories allow teachers to assess individual, group, or activity-based learning while illustrating the context of the interactions (Cowie & Carr, 2017). With Learning Stories, teachers can highlight the holistic nature of children’s learning, including describing the environment in which the learning occurs.

Learning Stories enable teachers to capture the breadth of children’s learning by describing the material, historical, social and cultural contexts to the learning (Cowie & Carr, 2017). Gipps (1999) states that:

Assessment within the framework of Sociocultural Theory is seen as interactive, dynamic, and collaborative. Rather than an external and formalized activity, assessment is integral to the teaching process and embedded in the social and cultural life of the classroom. (p. 378)

Aligning with Gipps’ (1999) and Fleer’s (2010) views of Sociocultural assessment practices, Learning Stories then fulfil Carr’s (2001) vision of creating an assessment method that allows teachers to stay true to the Sociocultural Theoretical perspective of Te Whāriki (MoE, 1996; 2017). Learning Stories allow teachers to assess learners’ attitudes, knowledge and skills while illustrating the context for the learning.

#### Learning Stories can make Valued Learning Visible

Learning Stories enable teachers to assess what learning is valued at their ECE setting or school. In Te Whāriki it states “assessment makes valued learning visible” (MoE, 2017, p. 63). Teachers can use Learning Stories to communicate what learning is valued, including both dispositional and subject-based learning. Lee et al. (2013) explain that Learning Stories also make visible “children’s developing identities as learners, based on the learning dispositions that parallel the five strands of the [Te Whāriki] curriculum” (p. 111). From a Sociocultural perspective, dispositional growth is highly valued by teachers and this growth can be made visible in Learning Stories.

In Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017, p. 22) it states “knowledge, skills and attitudes combine as dispositions, which are tendencies to respond to situations in particular ways”. Te Whāriki contains a list of learning dispositions (Note – it is acknowledged that this list is not exhaustive). Te Whāriki’s dispositions are culturally-influenced, particularly by te ao Māori (Māori world view), to encompass the unique bicultural perspective of New Zealand. The dispositions outlined in Te Whāriki are:

- courage and curiosity (taking an interest)

- trust and playfulness (being involved)
- perseverance (persisting with difficulty, challenge and uncertainty)
- confidence (expressing a point of view or feeling)
- responsibility (taking responsibility) (MoE, 2017, p. 23)

Dispositions are made up of a combination of attitudes and skills that come together as patterns of learning (MoE, 2004c; Carr, 2001). Karlsdóttir and Garðarsdóttir (2010) explain that learning dispositions acknowledge the child holistically - one who shows persistence, takes responsibility, gets involved, and communicates effectively. Dispositions highlight *how* a child approaches learning experiences. According to Carr (2001), dispositions are the way a learner responds and relates to the environment they are in. When learners demonstrate confidence to develop skills or attitudes in different situations, growth and learning occurs. As children learn, they develop a growing repertoire of dispositions as well as the ability to apply these dispositions in increasingly complex situations. Teachers in primary schools can also use Learning Stories to assess dispositions, and a collection of Learning Stories over time can highlight a child's dispositional growth.

Within Learning Stories, dispositions are the key element that should be assessed (Carr, 2001; Hatherly & Sands, 2002). Hatherly and Sands write that "the Learning Stories framework presupposes that the developing of these dispositions is at the heart of 'wise' practice in early childhood education and therefore most worthy of assessment" (p. 11). Many teachers see dispositions as crucial to a child's learning progress, so they prioritise dispositions when writing Learning Stories. Carr and Claxton (2002) explain why assessing learning dispositions is so important. According to these authors, displaying positive dispositions to learning is crucial in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because of the fast-changing world we live in. Moving away from the historical role of education - where students acquired knowledge and skills - 21<sup>st</sup> century education needs to build learners' "capacity and the confidence to engage in lifelong learning" (Carr & Claxton, 2002, p. 10). A learner's capacity to embrace new learning challenges grows as they expand their dispositions. Teachers can make children's dispositional growth visible through Learning Stories.

Learning Stories initially provided ECE teachers with a way to assess learning dispositions alongside skills and knowledge progress (Anthony et al., 2015; Cowie & Carr, 2017; Fraser & McLaughlin, 2016; Karlsdóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2010; Reisman, 2011). Now, some New Zealand primary school teachers have started using Learning Stories in their school context as a way to assess students' dispositional learning alongside curriculum progress from the NZC (MoE, 2007). From a New Zealand primary and secondary school NZC perspective, learning dispositions are referred to as Key Competencies.

## The Alignment of Te Whāriki and the New Zealand Curriculum

In both the ECE curriculum Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017), and the New Zealand English-medium primary and secondary school curriculum, the NZC (MoE, 2007), dispositional skills sit alongside the curriculum Learning Areas to guide teachers with their planning and teaching. Within Te Whāriki these skills are called dispositions and within the NZC they are called Key Competencies (KCs). KCs are an integral part of the NZC, drawing on “knowledge, attitudes, and values in ways that lead to action. They are not separate or stand-alone. They are the key to learning in every learning area” (MoE, 2007, p. 12). KCs in the NZC originated from an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) international project where a range of skills were established as vital for individuals to be able to lead a fulfilling life in our modern, fast-changing society and they were adapted for a New Zealand context after consultation and political debate (Hipkins, 2009). KCs are action-based. Rychen and Slaganič (2003) explain “a competence is manifested in actions, behaviours, or choices in particular situations or contexts” (p. 48). KCs are the dispositional manner in which an individual responds in particular situations and are critical for individuals to develop into a successful and fully functioning member of society.

KCs develop over time and are applied to many different contexts once the Competence is embedded in the learner’s actions. The MoE (2007) states that “Competencies continue to develop over time, shaped by interactions with people, places, ideas and things” (p. 12). Carr (1998, 2006) adds that although dispositions and KCs are separate to skills and knowledge, there is evidence that they are still interwoven. Carr believes that when a child has reached competency of a skill, they are then likely to demonstrate positive dispositions when working within this skill set. In this manner, dispositions (or KCs), skills, and knowledge are always somewhat connected.

There is potential for Te Whāriki’s dispositions and the NZC’s KCs to provide alignment and continuity for teachers across education sectors (Carr, 2006). Dispositions and KCs can support “connected learning environments, relationships, and images of the learner” (p. 26), including connecting ECE and school settings together. The alignment of Te Whāriki’s dispositions with the KCs provides an opportunity for teachers to support a continuity of practice for learners as they transition from ECE into primary school. Peters (2005) writes with optimism about linking learning through Te Whāriki’s dispositions and the NZC’s KCs. Peters raises the potential of Learning Stories to highlight the connection between the learner, KCs, and their situated context, due to the ability of Learning Stories to assess both dispositional growth as well as NZC Learning Areas through the narrative approach of Learning Stories.

### Using Learning Stories to Assess Key Competencies and Learning Areas of the NZC

The inclusion of KCs in the NZC (MoE, 2007) created a new challenge for principals, teachers and school Boards of Trustees: How should KCs be assessed? Hipkins (2009) investigated how New Zealand teachers were assessing KCs and she found that many teachers had attempted to use rubrics and checklists to mark off when a child was observed achieving a Key Competency (KC). Hipkins challenged the notion that checklists and rubrics were suitable methods to assess KCs and she queried how KCs could be assessed more effectively in primary schools. Hipkins (2007) states that “dispositions can only be demonstrated in action – assessment is of the moment and needs to be set in a meaningful context” (p. 9). Checklists of achievement do not fit this brief because they do not provide the context for the learning. Several alternative assessment options were mooted by Hipkins, including the use of Learning Stories, learning journals, and portfolios.

When discussing potential formative assessment methods that could help teachers and learners understand KC learning progress, Hipkins (2009) said that any suitable assessment would need to help learners build an understanding of “their identities as people who can practise, persist, and overcome obstacles to immediate learning success”(p. 5). KC assessment needs to be situated within the context of the learning experience and help the learner understand their strengths and where they continue to grow as a learner. Learning Stories, according to Hipkins, are therefore an appropriate way for primary school teachers to use to assess KCs.

The literature indicates that dispositions and NZC Learning Area knowledge can be assessed simultaneously within a Learning Story (Carr & Lee, 2019; Davis et al., 2013; MoE, 2009; O’Neil, 2018). Learning dispositions (or KCs) do not stand alone, but rather, dispositional learning and the learning of NZC Learning Areas are interconnected (Davis et al., 2013). In the NZC (MoE, 2007) subjects are grouped into eight curriculum Learning Areas: English, the arts, health and physical education, learning languages, mathematics and statistics, science, social sciences, and technology. Each Learning Area has a series of Achievement Objectives (AOs) outlining desired knowledge and skills-based learning outcomes across eight levels of learning. These AOs guide the teaching and learning experiences that teachers provide for students in New Zealand English-medium primary and secondary schools.

Unlike many other traditional assessments, Learning Stories can connect NZC Learning Area progress and KC learning through a “dual focus assessment conversation” (Davis et al., 2013, p. 28). A dual focus narrative within Learning Stories can assess aspects of KC progress alongside NZC AOs, highlighting observed Learning Area progress as well as KCs exhibited by the student during the learning experience. From a primary and secondary school perspective, Learning Stories have the



potential to provide an holistic view of the learner, assessing both a student's KC learning and progress within Learning Areas of the NZC together in one document.

### The Use of Learning Stories in Primary and Secondary Schools

In New Zealand, few studies have been conducted about the use of Learning Stories in primary and secondary schools, however, there are a small number of researchers who have explored this assessment in primary and secondary school contexts (Carr & Lee 2019; Davis et al., 2013). This includes research by Morton et al. in a Special Educational Needs context (2012), Smith et al. in a primary school context (2011) and Picken in her secondary school social studies class (2012).

Morton et al. (2012) undertook New Zealand-based research over two years, investigating how both KCs and NZC AOs could be assessed within a Learning Story at Level One of the NZC. Twenty-six teachers were supported by a team of researchers to investigate the potential use of Learning Stories for children with Special Educational Needs in schools. The research produced a resource for teachers (MoE, 2009) that provides examples of how Learning Stories can assess the KCs and make links to the NZC AOs. Participant teachers found that, through the Sociocultural approach of Learning Stories, they were able to make valuable assessments of learners' Competencies. The researchers reported that writing Learning Stories gave teachers, learners, and their families a chance to view the students as active, competent learners and gave teachers a chance to be reflective when planning for future learning.

New Zealand New Entrant primary school teacher Smith and her colleagues devised a Learning Story template to assess both KCs and NZC AOs (Smith et al., 2011). In her practice, Smith wrote a small narrative of observed literacy or numeracy learning, analysed the KCs observed, and then completed an analysis of the NZC Learning Area observed. Smith et al. refer to this as a "*split-screen* analysis of the learning" (2011, p. 43). The researchers noted that families were very interested in the narrative documentation method. The researchers observed that Learning Stories empowered the learner to continue to develop their KCs, and it made it easy for the child to identify their next learning steps. Additionally, Smith et al. found that the use of Learning Stories portfolios as a collection of Learning Stories over time allowed for children to understand and talk about their learning more readily.

Picken is a New Zealand-based secondary school teacher who investigated the use of Learning Stories in two secondary school social studies classrooms, with nine participating students, over a period of five months in 2011 (see Picken, 2012; Picken & Milligan, 2013). Picken noted that a key element of her research and practice was the understanding of Sociocultural Theory. In staying true to a Sociocultural perspective, Picken included the students, family/whānau and the teacher in the Learning Story process. Teachers wrote a learning narrative, students also wrote reflections, then

parents added comments. Picken viewed the inclusion of parents as key to the success of the project. Additionally, Picken found that quality relationships between all parties (the student, teachers and parents) were crucial in ensuring a classroom culture that embraced the reflective process of Learning Stories. Picken concluded that Learning Stories can be a useful assessment if they are a central part of the classroom practice and not just an added extra.

Learning Stories have provided some researchers with a way to assess children's KC and the NZC Learning Areas and AOs from a Sociocultural perspective in school settings. Learning Stories helped the teachers to be reflective and involve families in the assessment process. Students were involved in the Learning Stories process, supporting their ability to identify next steps and view themselves as capable learners.

## Learning Stories and Students

Students can contribute to their Learning Stories by having their voice recorded in the narrative section and by adding their perspective to the observed learning (Carr, 2001). A collection of Learning Stories can support students to develop their assessment capabilities. By revisiting Learning Stories, students can be supported to identify learning progress over time, thus developing an understanding of their personal strengths and progress. This understanding helps students develop a positive self-identity, leading to feelings of confidence and self-belief.

### Student Participation in the Learning Stories Process

Aligning with the goals of *Directions for Assessment in New Zealand* (Absolum et al., 2009) and the MoE's assessment position paper (MoE, 2011), it is intended that Learning Stories include students in the assessment process. According to Absolum et al., students should be involved in the assessment process and contribute to the assessment of their learning. Carr (2001) values children as participants in the Learning Story assessment process, describing this as gathering the *child's voice* or *student's voice*. The MoE (2004b) provides their rationale for including the child's voice in assessment, stating that they regard "children as social actors with opinions and views of their own" (p. 2). From a Sociocultural perspective, children are valued contributors to the assessment process.

Student voice can be recorded in Learning Stories by including quotations from the child as part of the narrative, or as a reflection on the observed learning. Students may even request for Learning Stories to be written about episodes of learning (MoE, 2004b). Including student voice shows that the child's perspective about their learning is valued and adds another lens from which to view the child's growth as a learner. Including student voice in Learning Stories can orient children towards future learning opportunities, supporting learners to develop their self-assessment capabilities.

According to Absolum et al. (2009), participating in the Learning Story assessment process can support the growth of students' assessment capabilities, stating "when students participate in the assessment of their own learning, they learn to recognise and understand main ideas and to apply new learning in different ways and situations" (p. 19). Contributing to Learning Stories and revisiting previous Learning Stories with teachers and family/whānau can help learners understand their strengths and progress, and develop a sense of what 'good work' looks like. With supportive adults, students can discuss their successes and progress, as illustrated in their Learning Stories (MoE, 2004b), contributing to their growing self-assessment capabilities.

#### Revisiting and Reviewing Learning Stories to Understand Student Progress over Time

When revisiting Learning Stories, children are able to affirm their self-identity as a learner (Hedges, 2013). The strengths-based approach can help children develop an understanding of their strengths, building students' belief in their capabilities. When teachers, family/whānau and students review a child's learning together they keep memories of successes alive (Carr & Lee, 2019). Revisiting Learning Stories can support students to deepen an understanding of their strengths and personal identity, and can help learners develop an "inner sense of satisfaction" (MoE, 2004b, p. 5). This self-belief can encourage students to strive to further their learning and progress in other contexts over time.

Reviewing a collection of Learning Stories can support students to understand their progress. The MoE (2017) states that formative assessment such as Learning Stories are "useful for informing children, whānau and families, other kaiako, and external support agencies about children's learning and progress over time" (p. 63). According to the MoE (2004d), a child's progress over time should be evident across a series of Learning Stories. A collection of Learning Stories can show that "a child's competence in a range of areas becomes more *secure*, more widely *applicable* and more *complex*" (p. 6). A collection of Stories can also highlight a child's "niches, or comfortable and familiar ways to learn" (Carr, 1998, p. 23). Therefore, when revisiting and reviewing a collection Learning Stories, patterns of progress as a learner may be evident.

Teachers need to be intentional about making links between Learning Stories so that they show learner progress. To show continuity of learning "there ought to be very clear links between Learning Stories, rather than Stories standing alone" (Sands, 2017, p. 4). For learners to see their progress over time the writer should make connections in Learning Stories that link back to learning described in previous Stories. Teachers and parents can also support students to identify progress over time when they read Learning Stories together. For students to easily revisit their Learning Stories, teachers need to consider systems that make Learning Stories readily accessible.

It is recommended that Learning Stories are collected in portfolio folders and stored so that they are freely accessible to the learner (Anthony et al., 2015; Carr & Lee, 2019; Hooker, 2019). A portfolio is described as a purposeful collection of artefacts that tells a story about children's effort and progress (Abrami & Barrett, 2005). When Learning Stories are stored in accessible portfolios, children, family/whānau, as well as teachers, are able to easily review the child's progress over time. Revisiting Learning Stories is an important aspect of growing children's assessment capabilities. Carr and Lee (2019) advocate for the use of paper portfolio folders. A readily accessible Learning Stories portfolio allows for opportunities for children, teachers, and family/whānau to discuss what learning might come next for the child. Paper portfolios can become a *literacy artefact* (Carr & Lee, 2019), encouraging the development of children's early reading skills and oral language. Portfolios encourage collaborative conversations between children, peers, teachers and family/whānau.

### Using Learning Stories to Build Family/Whānau Connections with School

Learning Stories can help build meaningful connections between home and school. They provide a starting point for discussions with families and encourage the sharing of family perspectives on children's learning. Teachers can learn more about a child's cultural background through connections with families (Hood, 2018) and teachers can demonstrate that they value a child's cultural identity by what they include in Learning Stories.

#### Learning Stories Help Build Home-School Relationships

The collaborative nature of Learning Stories values multiple perspectives of the learner and encourages family/whānau contributions to Learning Stories (Carr, 2001; Education Review Office, 2007; Peters et al., 2009; Wanoa & Johnston, 2019). Including and valuing family contributions can enhance a child's learning and provide a bridge between a child's experiences at home and beyond (MoE, 2004e). Sociocultural Theory acknowledges the cultural lenses that children bring to learning, and inviting families to contribute their perspective to Learning Stories can support stronger partnerships between teachers and family/whānau.

From a Sociocultural perspective, assessments should recognise family aspirations for the learner. Learning Stories should reflect moments that affirm "the child's cultural and family identity" (Lee et al., 2013, p. 112). This involves teachers taking time to build relationships with families, listening to their perspectives and acknowledging these. Hood (2018) writes that teachers should include a child's background knowledge and value learners' cultural diversity in their programmes and assessments. Seeking family perspectives on learning can demonstrate that teachers value their cultural knowledge and background and can support the development of strong connections between home and school. Learning Stories provide meaningful documents for teachers to talk about with families and this can lead to conversations about parent expectations for learning (Carr &

Lee, 2012). Through Learning Stories parents can come to understand what types of learning is valued in the educational context and collaborative conversations with teachers can lead to parents sharing what learning they most value too. Collaboration between teachers and family/whānau can lead to teachers and families working together to realise a child's potential.

### Digital Sharing of Learning Stories with Family and Whānau

Traditionally Learning Stories were shared as a paper document with children and families (Hooker, 2019). Increasingly however, teachers have shared Learning Stories digitally with family/whānau via online platforms. Hooker explains how sharing Learning Stories with families digitally can grow connections between teachers and families, with parents accessing their child's Learning Stories more regularly (usually on their mobile phone) compared to accessing their child's paper portfolio. Higgins and Cherrington (2017) suggest that sharing Learning Stories digitally with parents leads to parents contributing more regularly to Learning Stories, thus leading to teachers having a fuller understanding of the child's life beyond the educational setting. Carr and Lee (2019) believe that there is a place for both digital and paper portfolios, with each having a different purpose. Digital portfolios provide opportunities to connect instantly and regularly with families – even families who live overseas - and can connect with parents who find it difficult to come into school (Hooker, 2019). Paper portfolios, however, remain important for children to have ready and regular access to their Learning Stories in the classroom.

Learning Stories provide a way to formatively assess children's learning from a strengths-based, holistic approach with the teacher, student and family/whānau working collaboratively to highlight the strengths, interests and progress of students. Because the predominant mode of teaching in ECE in New Zealand is through play, Learning Stories most frequently assess play-based episodes. As New Zealand primary school teachers increasingly move towards play as a mode of learning in their classrooms, some have started using Learning Stories because they are an assessment that aligns appropriately with their learning through play pedagogy.

### Learning Through Play

Learning through play programmes are becoming increasingly common in New Zealand primary schools (Crowhurst, 2021; Davis, 2018; Hedges, 2018). Teachers are viewing play as a valid way for children to learn and schools are adapting their programmes accordingly. What constitutes learning through play, and what the teacher's role is during play, are concepts that play-based teachers need to understand in order to run effective learning through play programmes. Researchers describe play as occurring on a continuum, with child-led play and playful learning activities being of most learning benefit. A small number New Zealand-based researchers have investigated the positive impact that learning through play programmes can have on learners in primary schools.

## Towards a Definition of Play

Defining exactly what play is can be a difficult task because play activities can be so varied (Brown & Vaughan, 2010). Brown and Vaughan hesitate to define play because “it is a thing of beauty best appreciated by experiencing it” (p. 18). According to Brown and Vaughan, play is a preconscious, primal activity that arose from ancient biology, and play can occur without conscious thought. These authors see play as an experience, a feeling – something that needs to be experienced to be understood. Sahlberg and Doyle (2019) also suggest that defining play is difficult, saying that “play can be so many different things to different people” (p. 49). Sahlberg and Doyle write that people can know a child is playing just by observing them. Articulating *why* it is play is more difficult for the observer. Sahlberg and Doyle believe that play is a universal condition that helps children rehearse skills for life. They explain that much of childhood is not easily defined or measured, including play. Finding it difficult to define play is a theme throughout literature about play. According to Yogman et al. (2018), on behalf of the American Academy of Pediatrics,

A definition of play is elusive. However, there is a growing consensus that it is an activity that is intrinsically motivated, entails active engagement, and results in joyful discovery. Play is voluntary and often has no extrinsic goals; it is fun and often spontaneous. Children are often seen actively engaged in and passionately engrossed in play; this builds executive functioning skills and contributes to school readiness (bored children will not learn well). Play often creates an imaginative private reality, contains elements of make believe, and is nonliteral. (p. 2)

Play is voluntary, so if one is forced into participating in an activity, this is not play. The person playing can choose to leave at any time (Brown & Vaughan, 2010; Else, 2014; Gray, 2013; Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019). Play can help children develop self-control, working memory and imagination. Play is a pleasurable experience that will hold children’s focus.

Researchers write that playing generates feelings of happiness and satisfaction (Else, 2009; Fisher, 2008; Gray, 2013; Moyles, 2015; Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019; Smith, 2010). Because play is something one enters into willingly, and those involved have a sense of control over their play, play leads to feelings of intrinsic satisfaction for participants (Else, 2014). Else believes that “satisfaction through play creates a sense of aliveness not often present in other modes of being” (p. 6). Gray (2013) articulates that the positive feelings generated during play will “always be accompanied by the feeling of *Yes, this is what I want to do right now*” (p. 141). Gray also reinforces that play involves a voluntary choice.

Although Yogman et al. (2018) discuss executive functioning skills, they do not discuss learners' "Theories of Mind" or social relationships. Several play researchers state that childhood play enables the child to test out their *Theory of Mind* (Brock et al., 2009; Carr, 2001; Meyers & Berk, 2014; Murray, 2015; Pronin Fromberg, 2015; Smith, 2010). Brock et al. define Theory of Mind as "the ability to understand what another creature might be thinking, and to change one's own behaviour to account for this" (p. 287). Smith explains that this happens predominantly during imaginary or pretend play, where the child can develop an understanding of multiple perspectives during the play. During play, children can build a picture of how things, and others, work. This helps children understand their place in the world, and the actions, feelings and beliefs of others (Carr, 2001; Murray, 2015). According to Theory of Mind principles, play enables a child to make sense of their unique thought processes as an individual, and how these fit with others who they play with.

Play can be social or *non-social* (Coplan et al., 2015). As defined by Coplan et al., social play describes "all forms of play behaviours displayed during interaction with peers" (p. 97). Social play needs a level of social participation and contributes to the development of social competence. Social play will include active conversations between children as they negotiate the play. In contrast, solitary, or non-social play, according to Coplan et al., is "solitary activities and behaviours in the presence of potential play partners" (p. 98). The authors note that a child playing alone due to a lack of play partners – for example at home with no children to play with - are not engaging in non-social play, they are simply lacking available play partners.

Although play can be difficult to define, play has many unique characteristics, including voluntary participation, feelings of satisfaction while playing, the use of imagination and the choice to leave play at any time. Through play, children can make sense of the world they live in.

### Types of Play

Alongside the difficulty for play researchers in defining exactly what constitutes play, there are also variations within the literature when categorising different types of play. Hughes (2012) identifies 16 play types. Moyles (2012) lists 14 different types of play. Briggs and Hansen (2012) identify ten types of play that they say are suitable for primary school aged students. Sahlberg and Doyle (2019) outline five common types of play identified by many play researchers. Although there is some overlap with types of play within each researcher's lists (Appendix A outlines a selection of researchers' types of play categories), most play types can fit into one or more of the categories outlined by Sahlberg and Doyle, and this is the list of play types that I will now explain further for the purpose of my research.

These are:

- Physical play
- Play with objects
- Symbolic play
- Socio-dramatic play
- Games with rules (2019, p. 50)

*Physical play* helps children develop their gross and fine motor skills, typically through activities such as climbing, dancing, building, clay, and sand play (Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019). Physical play helps children relieve stress and improve their mood while encountering “opportunities for decision making that stimulate problem-solving and creative thinking” (Moyles, 2012, p. 115). According to Moyles, physical play is most important from birth to age 12.

*Play with objects* frequently involves construction activities, for example with Lego, blocks, puzzles or materials such as clay and playdough. This can also include play with water and various containers or objects (Smith, 2010). Object play can help a child develop their fine motor skills, as well as their problem solving abilities.

*Symbolic play* occurs when children use various objects as substitutions for real objects, for example paper as money, or a block as a telephone. This may occur during fantasy or family play (Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019). Symbolic play develops in complexity as a child grows and is considered to be one of a child’s most significant developments (Moyles, 2012). When a child can participate in symbolic play, they are demonstrating their ability to think in an abstract manner.

*Socio-dramatic play* involves role play with more than one participant (Smith, 2010). Participants enact real or imagined experiences “of an intense personal, social, domestic or interpersonal nature” (Else, 2009). Socio-dramatic play involves a group of children enacting situations that are of meaning to their lives.

*Games with rules* are developmentally appropriate for children from approximately the ages of 6-7 years (Moyles, 2012). Games with rules can include team sports and board games. According to Moyles, games with rules help children learn turn taking, cooperation, strategy and negotiation, and how to win or lose gracefully.

While children play, they can develop new skills through a wide range of play types. In many educational settings, play is accepted as the most appropriate way for young children to learn.

### Learning Through Play at Primary School

Research shows that learning through play is an effective way for young children to learn (Aiono, 2020; Davis, 2015; Gray, 2013; Gronlund, 2010; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Resnik, 2017; Riley & Jones,



2010; UNICEF, 2018; Weisberg et al., 2013). Learning through play is widely acknowledged as the most accepted way children learn in the preschool years (UNICEF, 2018) and UNICEF also acknowledges that “active, play-based learning approaches can transform the educational experiences of children in the early primary grades and strengthen learning motivation and outcomes” (p. 6). According to UNICEF, children up to the age of eight benefit greatly from being educated in play-based classrooms because while playing children are able to be socially interactive, find out about the world around them, and playfully practise new skills. Riley and Jones (2010) also advocate for learning through play programmes at primary school, stating that through play at school, children learn to make decisions, develop a sense of control over their learning, and develop self-confidence.

When children are happy and self-confident, they are in the optimum space to learn. “Learning occurs best in a playful state of mind” (Gray, 2013, p. 72). Gray believes that children are naturally playful, and learn a multitude of skills and knowledge in their preschool years without formal instruction, by having an innate drive to learn through playful interactions with their world. It is Gray’s belief that primary schools can continue to foster this desire to learn by providing playful learning opportunities.

Through play, children are best able to interact with others and their environment. Play allows children to build on and extend skills and knowledge and gives children opportunities to enhance their language development through frequent verbal interactions with peers and teachers (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). In Pyle and Danniels’ research into 15 Canadian play-based kindergarten classrooms (equivalent to primary school Year 1 in New Zealand), they found that “child-directed play, collaboratively created play, and teacher-directed play all present important opportunities for personal, social, and academic growth” (Pyle & Danniels, 2017, p. 287). Children can learn both social and academic skills during learning through play programmes in primary schools.

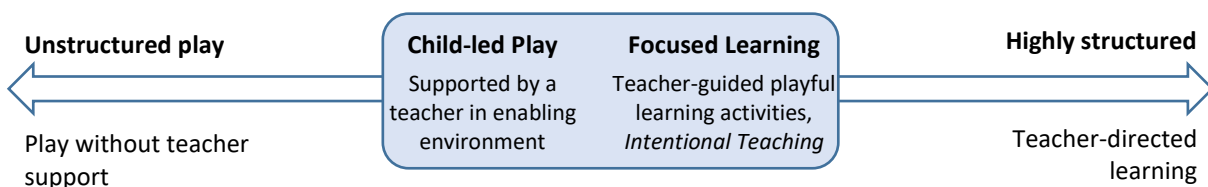
#### [A Continuum of Learning Through Play Practices in Classrooms](#)

Play is sometimes described as occurring on a continuum (Briggs & Hansen, 2012; Department for Children Schools and Families (DfCSF), 2009; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Briggs and Hansen (2012) illustrate the balance of power and control between teacher and student on their play continuum. At one end is child-led play, with the child holding more power and choice. At the other end is adult-led activities, where the teacher holds more power and control. Briggs and Hansen see the need for an appropriate balance of power during learning through play, where play moves interchangeably between child-led activities and times when adults respond to further children’s learning. The DfCSF (2009) have unstructured play without adult support at one end of their continuum and highly structured, adult-directed activities at the opposite end. In the middle of DfCSF’s continuum is what

they regard as optimum play opportunities, which involves “child-initiated play, actively supported by adults” (p. 5), where according to these authors, optimum learning occurs. Pyle and Danniels (2017) designed a play continuum that has free play at one end, and play with games at the opposite end. Collaboratively designed play sits in the middle. According to Pyle and Danniels, “in collaborative play there is a shared locus of control” (2017, p. 283), with teachers and students working collaboratively to design and resource play activities. Figure 1. is an example continuum which draws on the main features of the continuums outlined above.

**Figure 1**

*A Continuum of Play in Primary School Classrooms*



Along the play continuum developed for this research and illustrated in Figure 1, teachers provide varied levels of support and intervention. At one end of this continuum play occurs as unstructured, where teachers who are observing the play only intervene to provide requested resources or to sort out disputes. This type of play may have limited opportunities to extend learning and can at times appear chaotic (DfCSF, 2009). At the other end of this continuum are highly structured teacher-led lessons. This type of highly structured teaching “deprives children of the opportunity to engage actively with learning” (DfCSF, 2009, p. 5). According to the literature, for optimal learning during play teachers will provide a mix of child-led play, and playful learning activities and this is illustrated by the shaded middle area of the continuum in figure 1.

During child-led play, the child is in control of the activity (Else, 2014). Teachers do not lead the play, but support by providing resources or responding when children need help or reassurance (National Playing Fields Association, 2000). Alongside child-led play, playful learning activities enhance learning in play-based classrooms. Playful learning involves teachers embedding new learning into meaningful play contexts (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2008). According to Hirsh-Pasek et al., “children taught

in a more playful manner almost always achieve more than children who are subjected to more direct teaching methods” (p. 54) such as worksheets and teacher-directed lessons. These authors note that teachers must be skilled observers of play in order to plan appropriate playful learning activities. A combination of opportunities for child-led play and playful learning experiences, guided by an observant and intentional teacher, can lead to optimum outcomes for children in learning through play classrooms.

### Teacher Observation during Learning Through Play

Through careful observation teachers can build a better understanding about the child in order to inform the teaching and learning process (Hill, 2019). A simple way to understand more about play is to carefully observe children playing. To understand children’s interests, strengths, and needs, and to plan appropriate play activities, teachers need to prioritise time to observe play (Briggs & Hansen, 2012; Smith, 2010). Fisher (2008) acknowledges that observing play instead of engaging in play doesn’t come easily to some teachers, noting that teachers frequently immerse themselves in children’s play. However, without taking time to observe play, crucial information about children’s strengths and interests can be missed.

It is important to document observations of children’s play because observations can show changes and progress over time, including increased complexity, content, and changing interests in the play (Howard & King, 2015). Documented observations can become a record of children’s progress. In Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017) it states that observations should lead to direct changes in teaching in order to better help children reach learning goals. When these observations are documented they become a more formal assessment record. The MoE state that “by analysing such assessment information, gathered over time, kaiako are able to track changes in children’s capabilities, consider possible pathways for learning, and plan to support these” (2017, p. 63). Observations over time, when documented, are a powerful way for teachers to track a child’s progress and growth as a learner during play.

Observations (noticing and recognising learning) are a critical component of effective learning through play programmes. Teachers can gain a deeper understanding of children’s strengths and interests and ascertain possible future learning steps. Although teachers are frequently deeply involved in the play in their classroom (Fisher, 2008), to properly understand the learning occurring it is important they take the time to step back, observe the play, and record the observations. This allows teachers to make intentional planning decisions about future learning experiences.

### Intentional Teaching Through Play

Several researchers discuss the need for teachers to be *intentional* when teaching through play (Aiono, 2020; Aiono & McLaughlin, 2018; Edwards, 2017; Epstein, 2009, 2014; Gronlund, 2010; Leggett & Ford, 2013). Intentional teaching involves teachers observing children playing then carefully planning learning opportunities so that content starts from children's observed interests and abilities. Intentional teachers work alongside children by guiding, explaining and supporting them to extend their play.

Aiono and McLaughlin (2018) state that intentional teaching occurs when:

Teachers use their knowledge of the students' learning needs to intentionally integrate concepts, ideas and knowledge both within the students' play and during teacher-directed activities. ...In all situations it involves teachers acting with purpose, intention, and awareness with the goal to ensure optimal learning occurs for all students. (p. 7)

Intentional teaching during play involves using a wide range of teaching strategies and resources to respond to student interests and needs. Teachers will intentionally integrate language, skills, or knowledge within students' play in response to their observations in order to encourage optimum learning during play. Aiono and McLaughlin (2018) suggest that teachers plan "play invitations" (p. 7) to respond to their observations. Play invitations aim to encourage the learning of new skills or knowledge that children may not otherwise explore independently during play by introducing motivating resources to engage children in new learning.

During learning through play, intentional teachers provide "materials and experiences children are less likely to encounter on their own, systems of knowledge they cannot create on their own" (Epstein, 2009, p. 46). Intentional play-based teachers, as described by Epstein, know how and what they want students to learn and look for opportunities within play to integrate this learning. Hedges (2014) states that it is possible for curriculum-based learning to occur during play with careful "content pedagogical mediation of knowledgeable teachers during child-initiated interactions" (p. 200). This means that educators need to be knowledgeable in the content they wish to teach and be intentional about when they introduce curriculum content without directing children's play.

Teachers who participate in children's play can intentionally extend children's vocabulary and thinking by guiding children's attention to new learning or by adding new ideas and resources to the play (Hedges, 2014; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015; Weisberg et al., 2013). According to Weisberg et al., evidence suggests that children learn best when learning through play programmes incorporate some degree of adult scaffolding. For this to happen, however, teachers need to be intentional

about when they introduce new knowledge or skills into the play, and also when they leave the play to be child-led.

Teachers should make intentional choices about whether they enter children's play or observe from a distance. During learning through play teachers will, at times, intentionally remove themselves from the play and simply observe while children lead their own learning (Epstein, 2014). This is because effective play-based teachers understand that sometimes adult involvement interrupts child-led play. Else (2014) describes how untimely adult interruptions can *contaminate* play: interruptions can deny children the chance to solve problems themselves, or can stop the play altogether. Therefore, teachers need to be intentional about their interactions with children engrossed in play, remaining mindful of any potentially negative impact of interruptions on child-led play.

Intentional teachers in learning through play primary school classrooms choose appropriate moments to integrate new learning into play and make intentional choices to leave children to play independently. As learning through play programmes become increasingly popular in New Zealand primary schools, teachers have begun exploring what effective play-based programmes should look like in their schools.

#### [Learning Through Play in New Zealand Primary Schools](#)

In New Zealand a growing body of evidence shows that play-based learning is effective for students in primary schools and teachers are embracing this (Aiono, 2017, 2020; Aiono et al., 2019; Crowhurst, 2021; Davis, 2015, 2018; Hedges, 2018; O'Neil, 2018). Davis (2015) writes of the potential for play-based programmes to support effective transitions into school, and how although there is much enthusiasm for play in primary schools, teachers may need to revise their teaching approach in order to effectively teach through play. Aiono (2017, 2020) explains that teachers need to understand their role in play for children to learn effectively through play.

Using play to transition students into primary school has had a positive impact for children, providing familiar links to their pre-school experiences and supporting children to settle quickly into school (Davis, 2015; Hedges, 2018). Davis (2015), a researcher who investigated transitions to school for five year olds at a New Zealand primary school, reported improved continuity of educational experiences for children starting school when the teachers adopted play-based learning. Davis found that when teachers scheduled time for learning through play, children developed more positive attitudes towards school. The teachers reported that the familiarity of play allowed children freedom to make choices about what they did at school, which meant they settled quickly into school. During play sessions children also established positive social relationships with their new

classmates. The teachers also reported improved behaviour in children and that the children were happier at school, compared to children who had not had play in their classroom programme.

Primary school teachers are frequently enthusiastic about implementing learning through play programmes in their classrooms, however they can sometimes find it difficult to understand their role as the teacher during play-based learning (Aiono et al., 2019; Davis, 2018). The literature indicates that many primary school teachers want to offer learning through play in their classrooms, but they are unsure of exactly what to do. As teachers introduce play into their programmes, they need to learn what the teacher's role is during the play and adjust their teaching style accordingly. Davis (2018) explains that as teachers develop a play-based learning pedagogy, their role shifts from that of a traditional teacher who plans for predetermined outcomes, to one where the teacher responds to emerging interests and needs as they arise.

Teachers who misunderstand their role during learning through play sometimes abandon all rules, routines and direct teaching (Aiono, 2017, 2020). Aiono, who undertook research into supporting six New Zealand primary school teachers to implement effective learning through play programmes in their classrooms, emphasises that not all play programmes in primary schools are of equal educational value. Aiono observed that when teachers misunderstand their role, children may not make significant learning progress through the play because their exposure to new knowledge is limited to that of their peers they play alongside. Aiono explains that the primary school teacher's role in learning through play is to provide a balance of child-led play and acts of intentional teaching. With this balance, children can learn effectively through play.

## Summary

The literature reviewed has shown that Learning Stories are a formative assessment used to assess children's learning and progress from a strengths-based perspective. Learning Stories can have an impact on teacher practice, student assessment capabilities, and help build family/whānau connections with the school. The literature also indicates that Learning Stories can effectively assess learner progress over time in both dispositional learning and NZC Learning Areas. Learning Stories are the most common assessment method in New Zealand ECE settings (Mitchell, 2008) and some primary school teachers have started using Learning Stories in their primary school classrooms – often to assess learning during play (O'Neil, 2018). This chapter has outlined how the literature defines learning through play, including what this should look like in a primary school context and what a primary school teacher's role is in learning through play classrooms.

There is little current research into the use of Learning Stories in New Zealand primary schools. My research aimed to take a close look at how some primary school teachers are using Learning Stories

in their assessment practice. The following chapter outlines the methodology used in this research, as well as the data collection methods and ethical considerations made during the research.

# Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter explains the research methodology applied in this research, the influence of Sociocultural Theory and the ideas of Vygotsky. The research design, data collection methods and the criteria of trustworthiness and credibility by which this research can be evaluated are outlined, as well as important ethical considerations undertaken. An overview of the analysis of evidence concludes this chapter.

## The Research Paradigm

Research in education attempts to find answers to questions in order to better understand aspects of education (Needham, 2016). The nature and purpose of the research will influence the paradigm within the research will be carried out. Research is underpinned by three widely utilised paradigms: Positivism, critical theory and interpretivism and each paradigm has a differing research approach (Cohen et al., 2018; Ma, 2016; Neuman, 2011). The characteristics of the paradigm help guide the researcher through the research process, including how the researcher gathers, interprets, and reports on the evidence. This research fitted within an interpretivist paradigm, which is now described in more detail.

Within an interpretivist paradigm human perceptions are recognised as subjective and dependant on their social and cultural context (Willis, 2012). Bryman (2016) explains “Interpretivists consider the description of human action as being tied to particular social, historical and cultural contexts. They strive to establish a shared understanding of the world with other social beings” (p. 26). People are inextricably inter-connected with the world around them and the other people who they interact with. Interpretivist research involves examining the context and situation of the participants, through the eyes of the participants (Bryman, 2016). This examination involves examining the feelings and actions of the participants, from their point of view. The interpretivist researcher aims to understand the participant’s view of their world and accepts the perspective of the participants as evidence.

## Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural Theory is a theoretical framework that sits within the interpretivist paradigm. Sociocultural Theory “assumes that individual development must be understood in, and cannot be separated from, its social and cultural-historical context” (Rogoff, 2003, p. 50). From a Sociocultural perspective, cultural processes are not separate from an individual’s development and people learn and grow through participation in cultural activities. Equally, Sociocultural processes develop and change through the involvement of successive generations of people. Rogoff states that “humans develop through their changing participation in the Sociocultural activities of their communities,



which also change” (2003, p. 11). The relationship between a society’s cultural development and an individual’s growth and development is one of mutual transformation (Sewell et al., 2019). The relationship between human growth and cultural growth as a society is reciprocal.

From a Sociocultural perspective, culture “comprises the patterns of ideas, values and beliefs common to a particular group of people, their ‘characteristic’ ways of thinking and feeling” (Inglis, 2005, p. 5). Cultural processes are unique to communities and social groups and cultural experiences make up the collective experiences within communities. These cultural influences intertwine with individuals to provide the context in which one develops and learns (Carr et al., 2019). Within Sociocultural Theory, a person’s development is not viewed as a separate entity. Instead, people develop and learn through interactions with others in their community. Children are influenced by their cultural context. Peters (2003) explains, “A key feature of [Sociocultural Theory] was the child’s interactions with others” (p. 16). Sociocultural Theory views children as socially-situated participants who learn through their interactions with others (The Early Years Learning Framework, 2012). Smith (2014) writes that from a Sociocultural perspective “children construct their own understanding in partnership with, and with guidance from, others (both adults and other children)” (p. 27). Both other adults and a child’s peers are understood to support children’s learning.

### Lev Vygotsky and the Zone of Proximal Development

Sociocultural Theory has largely been influenced by the works of Russian theorist and psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) (Cobb, 2005; Eun, 2010). Vygotsky believed that culture is central to children’s development. The interactions that children have with people, and the culture in which they live, is central to Vygotsky’s theories of how a child learns (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky theorised that children learn new knowledge and skills through human interaction. These interactions occur in what Vygotsky called the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD).

Vygotsky defined the ZPD as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). ZPD theory has implications for educators. Vygotsky believed that with adult or peer support, children can achieve to a higher level than if they are left to their own devices. In other words, through supportive interaction with a capable adult or peer, children can function to a higher level than they could independently. According to Vygotsky’s theory, when a teacher knows a child’s ZPD, the child can learn concepts that are beyond their independent capabilities (Eun, 2010; Peters, 2003). Vygotsky theorised that if work is too easy, or beyond a child’s ZPD, then children won’t

learn. It is the educator's role to know where the learner's ZPD lies and provide opportunities to extend the child's learning that are just ahead of where a child can achieve independently.

The role of the teacher within a Sociocultural paradigm and when working within Vygotsky's ZPD is that of a mediator of learning, as opposed to one who is simply a transmitter of knowledge. A teacher works with the learner in a process of collaboration, recognising learners as "co-constructors of knowledge" (McNerney, 2016, p. 97). Vygotsky viewed the relationship between teacher and learner as reciprocal. Rogoff (2003) refers to this teacher role as *guided participation*, where collaboration between teacher and learner within a child's ZPD results in new learning. Teachers must be careful observers to identify children's ZPD (Mooney, 2013). Mooney explains that Vygotsky placed a strong emphasis on observation. Through careful observation, a teacher can identify a child's current levels of development and then support a child with appropriate further learning opportunities.

#### Vygotsky's View on Play

Vygotsky viewed play as an important way children learn, stating, "The influence of play on a child's development is enormous" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 96). Vygotsky believed that learning happens while children play because language and development happen together (Mooney, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978). He also believed that when children play they are learning through their interactions with each other while they are communicating, role-playing imagined situations and trying new experiences together. Vygotsky theorised that play was the leading aspect in a child's development and play creates a ZPD for the child, writing, "In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102). According to this theory, play allows a child to use higher mental functions.

During play, children are able to demonstrate a higher level of cognition than during other everyday tasks or during formal learning. Vygotsky believed that play allows children to "experiment with the meanings and rules of serious life" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 299). While playing, children can *play out* ordinary situations and actions, and make sense of the social roles in which they fit. Play gives children opportunities to experiment with rules and meanings of life and allows children to replicate real-life experiences, making sense of them through their re-enactment.

#### Interpretivism, Sociocultural Theory and the Approach to This Research

This research project fitted within an interpretivist paradigm. Aligning with Sociocultural Theory, this research aimed to understand the participant teachers' perspectives on the use of Learning Stories within the unique context of each school. Sociocultural Theory, and particularly the theories of Vygotsky (1976, 1978) about learning and play, influenced my views as researcher. Therefore, the

interpretivist paradigm and Sociocultural Theory underpinned the decisions made and the research methods utilised for this research.

## Research Method

There are three significant research methods: *quantitative*, *qualitative*, and *mixed methods* (Mutch, 2013; Tolich & Davidson, 2011). Each method has unique ways of gathering evidence and is underpinned by a specific research paradigm. Researchers select an appropriate research method, depending on the aims of their research. This research applied a qualitative approach. Qualitative research “involves the systematic analysis of language, actions, and documents to determine patterns, themes or theories that describe and provide insight into situations” (Boudah, 2020, p. 111). When analysing emerging themes and patterns during research, qualitative researchers exercise *inductive* reasoning, where themes are generated from the evidence gathered (Menter et al., 2011). Themes emerge from the evidence as it is gathered and analysed. Evidence gathered during qualitative research is context dependent, relying on interpretation by the researcher (Daniel & Harland, 2018). Interpretations made during the research may apply only to the specific research. Qualitative research is a subjective account of the views of the participants (Cohen et al., 2018) and information provided to the researcher by the participants and the interpretation of this information by the researcher both contribute to the subjective nature of the research findings.

Qualitative researchers openly declare their position as a researcher, including acknowledging “how their age, gender, social class, ethnicity or culture, geographic location, life experiences, and current status influence their research decisions” (Mutch, 2013, p. 84). Qualitative research demonstrates “adherence to the values of reciprocity and respect of participants” (Daniel & Harland, 2018). When undertaking qualitative research, researchers must acknowledge and respect the critical place the participants have in the research. In planning this research, I selected a qualitative approach because qualitative research “gives voices to participants” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 288). I aimed to gather the voices of the participant teachers, discovering how they have used Learning Stories in their own contexts.

## Case Study Research

Case study research involves delving deeply into the research topic, gaining a rich understanding of the research topic within its unique context. Case studies may investigate a person, setting, or concept (Mutch, 2013; Swanborn, 2012). Case study findings provide an in-depth description of the case. Yin (2014) gives a two-part definition to describe what a case study is, explaining that “a case study is an empirical inquiry that

- investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in depth and within a real world context, especially when
- the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (p. 16)

Case studies give researchers the chance to research a real world situation while providing a deeper understanding of the contextual conditions surrounding the case. Rozsahegyi (2019) writes that "case-study researchers appreciate and recognize that the case or cases, as real- life issues, are always embedded into and influenced by particular contextual circumstances" (p. 126). Case study research acknowledges and respects the context and unique circumstances surrounding each case.

Case study research is "not only interested in *what* goes on in the setting, they are also interested in explaining *why* those things occur" (Denscombe, 2014, p. 55). Case study researchers pay attention to case context in order to understand why things may be happening in the given situation. Case studies aim to "illuminate the general by looking at the particular" (Denscombe, 2014, p. 54), investigating one, or a small number, of cases to search for trends that may have wider implications. Denscombe explains that often "those who read the case study findings are able to infer things from them that apply to other settings" (p. 62). While acknowledging the uniqueness of each case, some case study findings have the potential to apply to other similar settings.

Case studies can be conducted as an *appreciative inquiry* (Reed, 2007; Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). An appreciative inquiry "examines what is positive in the organisation and uses what is positive as the beginning of future growth and development" (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013, p. 262). Researchers look for positive aspects and potential trends that could be continued and enhanced in the future. Using an appreciative inquiry approach to case study research can help support people make sense of their context and demonstrate ways that people could think or act differently (Reed, 2007). An appreciative inquiry approach to case study research can present positive potential adaptations or differences to interested parties.

Case studies can involve single or multiple cases. Studying multiple cases can lead to "better understanding, perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases" (Stake, 2000, p. 437). Researchers can look for trends, patterns, similarities and differences within each individual case and between cases when investigating multiple cases. This is known as a *multiple case design*. Multiple case designs can have the advantage of gathering more evidence than a single case, thus being seen as more robust or having the potential for greater generalizability (Cohen et al., 2018; Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013; Yin, 2014). By examining several cases researchers can draw wider findings from the evidence, potentially making findings that can transfer to a wider audience. Although a characteristic of case study research is that the findings are viewed as independent in

their own right (Stake, 2000), when multiple cases are used, evidence gathered may provide opportunities for wider generalizations.

Case studies can make a valuable contribution to educational research. In areas where knowledge is shallow or non-existent, others can learn from case studies (Punch & Oancea, 2014). Additionally, case study findings may connect the experiences of the participants with readers of the research. By undertaking educational case study research where there is little or no current research, there is potential for other educators to benefit and learn from the study. I chose to undertake a multiple case study as an appreciative inquiry for this research, with each case being the individual school where the participants teach. The multiple case study design involved investigating three cases where each case was investigated independently but simultaneously (Cohen et al., 2018).

Investigating three case schools enabled me gain a fuller insight into the use of Learning Stories in primary schools, compared to investigating a single case school and the appreciative inquiry allowed me to present benefits of using Learning Stories in primary schools in my findings.

#### Selecting Case Study Schools and Participant Teachers

When selecting case study participants, researchers should select cases that will contribute relevant evidence towards answering the research question. Qualitative case study researchers must make deliberate choices when selecting cases (Denscombe, 2014; Yin, 2014). Cases should meet a distinct criteria in order to answer the research question. Simons (2009) acknowledges that at times, researchers may not have many options for the cases they study. There may only be a small group to select from.

Researchers need to ensure reasonable accessibility to participants so cases need to be within realistic travelling distance for the researcher (Cohen et al., 2018). Additionally, access to participants can often be allowed or denied by 'gatekeepers' (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Punch & Oancea, 2014; Seidman, 2013). In school settings this may be the principal or Board of Trustees. Researchers need to consider the feasibility of access to participants and from whom to seek permission for access (Punch & Oancea, 2014). Researchers need to be aware of the complexities surrounding the access of participants through gatekeepers and they need to be respectful of the gatekeeper's role.

When selecting case study schools and participant teachers I had a set selection criteria: the participant teachers needed to be currently using Learning Stories in their assessment practice. To find out about schools who were using Learning Stories, I asked for recommendations from teaching colleagues for recommendations of schools who met my criteria. This method of participant selection is called *purposive sampling*, where "researchers handpick the cases to be included in the

sample on the basis of ... particular characteristics” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 218). Purposive sampling was an appropriate way to select my participant schools because the case study schools needed to be using Learning Stories in their current practice in order for me to gather evidence for this research.

I contacted potential participant teachers, principals and Board of Trustees from three schools by emailed letter (see Appendices C & F) which included an information sheet about my research (see Appendices D, G & I). Each party gave written consent to participate (see Appendices E, H & J). All forms were signed prior to the commencement of the research. The process of gaining consent took several weeks for one school. Because I had a perceived time constraint as I was aware that the end of the school year is often a very busy time for teachers, I decided to phone the principal of the potential school who I had not received consent from. Simons (2009) suggests that making a telephone call to the gatekeeper (the school principal in this instance) was a good idea because “you can tell a lot from tone and reaction” (p. 39). The phone call was not intended to be persuasive in nature, but gave me an opportunity to begin to establish a personal connection with the principal. The phone call resulted in an understanding that permission would be forthcoming shortly, and I successfully included this school in my research.

Although I had not initially intended to include the school where I was teaching at the time of the research as a case, the teachers asked to participate in the research. Mutch (2013) explains that it is common for researchers to undertake research their own settings because the research may be sparked by happenings in their own setting. Mutch believes that although there can be unique issues for researchers considering conducting research in their own setting, it is still possible for research to be undertaken if the potential disadvantages are considered thoroughly and minimised. I discussed the research with the teachers at my own school face-to-face. I provided them an introduction letter and with a different information sheet from the other two schools (see Appendix I). This information sheet outlined the appreciative inquiry nature of my research, explaining that our school has used Learning Stories for several years and that I would like to include our school’s views in my research. I also explained to each teacher that there was no expectation that they participate, that participation was entirely voluntary and any data gathered in this research would not be used in any way in their role as at school. Four teachers chose to participate in the research and one teacher declined.

### Interviews

Interviews are a common method of gathering evidence data in qualitative case studies. Interviews allow researchers explore topics in depth and gather detailed information from participants (Menter

et al., 2011). Interviews can be flexible in their approach to gathering evidence and are generally used to gather qualitative social-based evidence. Interviews can take many varied forms (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Mutch, 2013; Newby, 2014; Winwood, 2019). Winwood (2019) outlines three main interview types: *structured*, *semi-structured*, and *unstructured*. Each have key differences that need to be considered when choosing an appropriate interview type. Semi-structured interviews were used for this research because they provided a structure to the interview while allowing for flexibility with the interview discussion.

Semi-structured interviews have set of key questions to guide the interview, but questions are open-ended and the interviewer has freedom to seek clarification and ask follow-up questions to gain deeper explanations (Newby, 2014). The interviewee can guide the conversation and if questions have been accurately predicted they will be answered during the conversation (Daniel & Harland, 2018). Qualitative research interviews are often semi-structured and “require the interviewer to establish a relationship with the participant” (Mutch, 2013, p. 120). The interviewer needs to work to build a high level of trust and confidence from the interviewee so that they feel comfortable to disclose full and honest answers and opinions. The interviewer must be respectful, polite, non-threatening and avoid portraying any negative feelings such as annoyance or impatience. With qualitative research, interviewing is more than an evidence collection exercise. Rather, it is a social, interpersonal encounter (Cohen et al., 2018). Winwood (2019) suggests that interviewers start with simple questions to create confidence, build rapport and gather some basic background information of the interviewee.

Interviews can be conducted one-to-one or in groups. One-to-one interviews are most common due to their relative ease to organise – there are only two people who need to be available at the same time (Denscombe, 2014). Because there is only one source of information it is more straightforward for researchers to analyse one-to-one interview evidence. Transcription of one-to-one interviews is also easier, with no interruptions between participants and only one voice for the transcriber to listen for. In group interviews, researchers interview more than one person at the same time. Connolly (2016) suggests that in group interviews, participants are often more willing to give their views and perceptions freely, compared to one-to-one interviews. Connolly calls this the “risky shift phenomenon” (p. 142) where interview participants are more willing to take risks with their answers in groups than when they are alone. This means that it may be possible for researchers to gain a deeper insight into the research topic by conducting group interviews.

Group interview participants can extend the ideas of another interviewee, add their perspective, build on, or contrast another participant’s views (Cohen et al., 2018). In this manner, group

interviews may provide more detailed evidence in comparison to one-to-one interviews. Cohen et al. state that, when analysing group interviews, the researcher should view evidence as a collective group response, not as individual responses, even when opinions and ideas may not always be cohesive. Group interviews can be a time-efficient way to gather evidence (Cohen et al., 2018; Connolly, 2016; Denscombe, 2014) and can significantly increase the number of participant views gathered.

I used a mixture of group and one-to-one semi-structured interviews for this research. Interviews were semi-structured to encourage participants to provide an in-depth view on the topics discussed (Mutch, 2013). Two schools were group case studies, and one school had a single participant. The conversations in a group interview gathered a detailed picture of the group's views, opinions and ideas about the interview topic. Two interviews were completed at each school between August and December 2020. The time between the interviews allowed participants to review the first interview transcripts between interviews. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes and interviews were undertaken at the schools at times that suited the participants.

I wrote the interview questions in preparation for the interviews (see Appendix B). Guided by Winwood's (2019) suggestion that the interviewer starts with simple questions to build rapport with participants, my initial question encouraged the interviewees to openly talk about how they came to be using Learning Stories. This allowed the participants a chance to 'tell their story' (Seidman, 2013) as a way for me to understand how the participants came to be interested in participating in my research project. Because the interviews were semi-structured, the questions I generated were a guide to help lead the discussion, with the flexibility for myself, as the interviewer, to adapt the line of enquiry (Punch & Oancea, 2014) and seek clarification of answers given.

### Documents

Supporting documentation is frequently gathered in case study research. Documents can help augment evidence from other sources and allow the researchers to cross-check evidence (Yin, 2014). Documents can play an important role in case study research, adding depth and breadth to the evidence gathered. Documents may include written text (for example books, articles, reports, personal papers), digital communication such as emails, or visual sources such as videos or photos (Denscombe, 2014). Documentation may give the researcher a chance to clarify information provided in interviews, for example if interviews are unclear (Boudah, 2020). Researchers can use documentation to search for evidence to confirm what was shared in interviews. Researchers should be reflective when reviewing documentation, ensuring credibility and a representative picture to illustrate themes raised in other evidence sources, for example in interviews (Savin-Baden & Howell



Major, 2013). When researchers systematically examine documents to ensure they fit within these boundaries, documents are a powerful source of additional research evidence.

Within this research project, I collected sample Learning Stories after gaining parent permission of the children involved (see Appendix K). I also collected copies of school planning templates, school policies and other documentation the teachers chose to share with me. This included a Parent Feedback Survey about Learning Stories from one school. Gathered documentation helped confirm interview evidence gathered (Yin, 2014), supporting and strengthening the evidence.

### Trustworthiness and Credibility

When conducting qualitative interpretive research, attention needs to be given to the trustworthiness of the research findings (Boudah, 2020; Cohen et al., 2018; Mutch, 2013; Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). Trustworthiness is established when the researcher has “clearly documented the research decisions, research design, data-gathering and data-analysis techniques and demonstrated an ethical approach” (Mutch, 2013, p. 109). In trustworthy research the research process and findings will be transparent, well explained, and with clear justification of choices made within the research. Another way to ensure trustworthiness of research is to ensure *member checking* occurs (Boudah, 2020). Member checking involves participants reading through and checking transcripts of interviews to ensure accuracy. To establish trustworthiness in this research, I clearly explained my research intentions to the participants. I also shared the transcripts of each interview with the participants for them to read and check.

Credibility is another key aspect to be considered with qualitative research. Credibility of research presupposes that the results will be convincing, believable and understood by those in similar fields. The findings of a credible study will reflect the participants’ reality (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). In order to ascertain credibility, the situation described in the research will be accurate and relevant to the context. Credible research will resonate with those who have connection to the line of research. A common way to ensure credibility of research findings is to *triangulate the evidence* collected in the project (Boudah, 2020; Mutch, 2013). Case study evidence can be gathered in multiple ways, including observations, interviews, documents and reports. Case study researchers should collect sufficient evidence from at least two different sources, to enable the researcher to investigate their hypotheses (Creswell, 2013). When researchers gather evidence from a range of sources they can triangulate the evidence. Triangulating the evidence involves the researcher looking for trends in the data from more than one information source, in order to check the validity of the evidence gathered (Denscombe, 2014; Yin, 2014). When researchers gather evidence from more than one source they can search for themes and patterns across a wider field of information.

This can strengthen the validity of the findings. In this research, I was able to triangulate evidence through looking at both interview and document evidence, helping to strengthen the validity and the credibility of the research findings.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were adhered to throughout this research. I gained ethics approval from Te Kura Tangata Division of Education Ethics Committee, University of Waikato (FEDU045/20).

Potential conflicts of interest, the need for informed consent, and issues around confidentiality and anonymity were considered, as outlined below.

### Potential for Conflict of Interest, and Informed Consent

I acknowledged the potential for a conflict of interest in relation to one of the case study schools. I taught at one of the case schools and I was the participants' team leader. This had the potential for teachers to feel pressured to participate in the research due to an imbalance of power. Cohen et al. (2018) emphasise that researchers must be acutely aware of possible power imbalance in research, and take necessary steps to address these issues.

In addressing the potential conflict of interest with my own school, I verbally and in writing iterated to all potential participants that their participation was voluntary and they had the right to decline to participate and to withdraw from the research up until two weeks after receiving the final interview transcript. Additionally, I declared verbally and in writing that nothing discussed within the research project would be discussed with others or used within their work role. I decided to use group interviews, not one-to-one interviews with my own school, to minimise any role conflict issues that may arise (Mutch, 2013). The group interviews gathered a collective group response (Cohen et al., 2018), not individual views. This helped minimise potential power imbalance between participants and myself.

Prior to agreeing to participate in research, participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research, the way the research would be conducted, and possible ways the research findings would be reported (Mutch, 2013). In this research project all potential participants, principals and Boards of Trustees were given an introductory letter, a participation information sheet and consent forms (see Appendices C – J), outlining the necessary information to enable each potential participant to make an informed decision about their participation.

### Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymity are key features of ethical qualitative research. Confidentiality and anonymity involve the efforts a researcher undertakes to ensure a participant's details remain private (Boudah, 2020). A confidentiality statement was included in the participant information

sheet (see Appendices D, G & I). This stated that no identifying information would be used in the research report and no information disclosed by participants would be discussed with any staff members at the school they work at, or with anyone else, except my research supervisor.

In an attempt to protect anonymity of schools and individual participants, pseudonyms were used for individuals and schools and in the interview transcripts, each participant was assigned a code in order to protect anonymity. In the participant information sheet I outlined that all reasonable attempts to maintain participant anonymity and confidentiality would be taken, however this cannot be guaranteed due to the size and nature of educational networks in New Zealand. Participants interviewed in groups understood that they could not remain anonymous to each other. In order to maintain internal confidentiality – where participants keep confidential what other participants have disclosed in a group interview (Tolich, 2004) - I outlined to the participants at the start of the group interviews that they should not talk about what is raised in the interviews outside of the interview time. Although as researcher I could not control the participants' actions, I explained the importance of maintaining confidentiality to the group interview participants.

## Qualitative Analysis of Evidence

Analysing research evidence involves researchers searching for meaningful themes and patterns in order to examine them (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). One approach to qualitative analysis of evidence is *thematic analysis*. Thematic analysis helps the researcher identify, analyse and report patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this research project I was guided by Braun and Clarke's *Six Phases of Thematic Analysis* as a step-by-step process to gain meaning from the evidence. My analysis involved the following phases:

### *Phase 1: Familiarization with the Data*

I transcribed the interviews myself. This process allowed me to become familiar with the interview evidence. Bird (2005) describes the importance of researchers transcribing their own interviews as through the process of transcription the researcher pays close attention and begins interpretive thinking about the evidence. While transcribing the interviews, I also assigned codes to each participant and each interview, enabling me to track quotes from interviews and participants while maintaining anonymity for participants. For example, (B1/I2) identifies a comment from Bluebell School Participant 1, Interview 2. This allowed me to easily know which school participant comments were from and which interview the comment is from while I was searching for themes during Phase 3. I re-read the interview transcripts several times and the additional documents that participants had provided me with, including the parent survey about the use of Learning Stories from one participant school and Learning Story examples, which allowed me to become very familiar with the evidence. Re-reading evidence also allowed for early tentative analysis of themes within

the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Male, 2016). I then sent the interview transcripts to the participants for checking.

#### *Phase 2: Generating Initial Themes and Ideas*

Throughout the process of interviewing participants, transcribing interviews and reviewing the data, I kept a research journal, as suggested by Mutch (2013). I noted down any emergent themes that I thought may have been present in the interviews, any questions that I had, and anything else that came to mind that may help me with my research. This system allowed me to keep a record of developing initial themes and ideas about the evidence.

#### *Phase 3: Searching for Themes within Each Case Study*

To become clear about the themes from each school, I grouped parts of conversations in charts under themes for each school. In this manner, I was able to see key themes emerging for each school, who had said what, and how often each theme was discussed. By taking apart the interview evidence and grouping it into themes (Stake, 2010), I was able to start to interpret what participants from each school viewed as key to their use of Learning Stories. I reformatted the charts several times over successive days to ensure I was collating the evidence in a way that represented the participants' views.

#### *Phase 4: Searching for Themes across Case Studies*

Being mindful that a multiple case study design should look for similar attributes across cases (Savin- Baden & Howell Major, 2013), I went back to the charts I had made for each case study school and I created a mind map which linked common key words and phrases used by each school together, seeking trends in specific vocabulary use. I then re-read the interview transcripts again, looking for similarities between schools that I may have missed in the original mind map. By returning to the original interview transcripts I could also check the context in which individual quotes were said to ensure an accurate representation of the evidence (Male, 2016). This was a crucial step to ensure the findings are a trustworthy representation of the participants' views and practice.

#### *Phase 5: Defining and Naming the Key Characteristics and Common Attributes*

Once I established key characteristics of each school and common attributes across schools I began to look closely at each theme. Some themes were too diverse and they needed to be broken down into smaller themes (Nowell et al., 2017). I had to make decisions about which themes I wished to examine further, and which themes were less important. King (2004) cautions that novice researchers can examine too many themes in their research. I was mindful of not having too many themes so I grouped some themes together. Over time, I narrowed down my interpretation of what the key characteristics were of each case study school, as well as the common attributes and some constraints that were evident across all three schools. It took me many iterations of appropriate

names for each theme. Once I had established the framework for the themes and named them appropriately I was ready to write up my findings from the evidence.

#### *Phase 6: Producing the Findings*

In an attempt to follow a logical order, I grouped the findings into five sections. The first three sections outlined key characteristics of each case study school that I identified as strong themes from the evidence. The final two sections outlined the common attributes across case study schools, and some of the constraints that the schools faced when using Learning Stories. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the findings should be interesting, logical, concise, and lack repetition. I chose to set out the sections in this way to be concise in the reporting of my findings and minimise repetition in the evidence. Although some of the themes identified as key characteristics for individual case study schools were also present in another case study school findings, I kept to this presentation format to maintain interest and minimise repetition.

#### **Summary**

This chapter has outlined my rationale for undertaking qualitative research within an interpretivist paradigm, using a Sociocultural theoretical lens strongly underpinned by Vygotsky's ideas. I have outlined the multiple case study approach used, the interview method, criteria of trustworthiness and credibility by which this research can be evaluated, and important ethical considerations. To conclude, the analysis of evidence was explained. The following chapter outlines the research findings.

## Chapter Four: Findings

This multiple case study research was designed to investigate how some primary school teachers used Learning Stories in their assessment practice. Three schools participated in this research as individual cases, allowing for the collection of evidence across three different school settings. The participant teachers provided unique perspectives to this research from their varied experiences, with each school having a different school and community context. Each school had been implementing a learning through play programme for at least two years prior to their participation in this research. All participants had been using Learning Stories to assess the learning occurring during their school's play-based learning programmes.

The findings in this chapter are organised into several sections. Firstly, based on analysis, some key characteristics of each case study school will be described. These key characteristics highlight some strengths that each school presented during the research regarding their use of Learning Stories. Next, common attributes identified in the research as quality Learning Story practice, found across all three case study schools, will be presented. To conclude this section I will outline some identified constraints that impacted these teachers when implementing Learning Stories in their contexts.

Quotes from the interviews have been used to illustrate the findings. All school names, children's names mentioned by teachers, and teacher's names are pseudonyms. The exception to this is the professional learning and development (PLD) provider Longworth Education, used with permission from Dr Sarah Aiono, CEO of Longworth Education.

### A Brief Description of Participant Schools

The eight participants involved are teachers at three primary schools located in the central North Island of New Zealand.

**Aroha School** is an urban primary school in a provincial town, catering for Year 0 – 6 students. The school roll is approximately 380 students. Almost 50% of students are Māori, Pasifika and other ethnicities while 50% of students are NZ European. Students are taught in three-teacher collaborative classrooms. Three teachers participated in interview one, and two teachers in interview two, due to illness. One participant is the Year 0/1 team leader. Two participants are Scale A teachers. All three teachers teach collaboratively in a Year 0/1 class. Two teachers are Early Childhood Education (ECE) trained and have started teaching in primary schools in the past five years. One teacher is primary-trained.

**Bluebell School** is a rural primary school on the outskirts of a city, catering for Year 0 - 8 students. The school roll is approximately 350. 80% of students are NZ European, with 20% Māori or other

ethnicities. Children are taught in two-teacher collaborative classrooms. Four teachers participated in the interviews. All participants are Scale A teachers in the junior school. Two teachers teach Year 0/1 classes, one teacher teaches a Year 1/2 class, and one teacher teaches a Year 2/3 class. Two teachers are ECE trained and have started teaching in primary schools in the past six years. Two teachers are primary-trained.

**Coastview School** is an urban primary school in a small provincial town, catering for Year 0 - 6 students. The school roll is approximately 340. 75% of students are Māori or other ethnicities. 25% of students are NZ European. Children are taught in single-cell classrooms. One teacher participated in the research. Her role is team leader of the junior school. She teaches a Year 1 class and is primary-trained.

## Aroha School

The characteristics and quotes that follow represent the views and programmes provided by the case study participant teachers at Aroha School in two group interviews held in August and November 2020. Aroha School provides a learning through play-focused transition to school programme, where children are taught in a collaborative classroom by three teachers. Children starting at Aroha School all begin their schooling in the participant teachers' transition to school class, and they move into classrooms with more formal learning once the teachers see the children as developmentally ready.

### Key Characteristics of Aroha School Teachers' Use of Learning Stories

Aroha School participant teachers (2/3 who are ECE qualified) valued the Te Whāriki ECE curriculum and this is embedded in the teachers' planning, teaching, and assessment practice, including the use of Learning Stories. When writing Learning Stories the participant teachers described dispositional growth and the learning areas of Te Whāriki as their most important focus. They shared their observations together and reread previous Learning Stories in order to write Learning Stories that show a child's dispositional growth in a range of contexts over time. The teachers saw Learning Stories as a way to empower learners to develop positive dispositions and to support parents to understand the value of dispositional and holistic growth for their children.

### Learning Stories, Te Whāriki, and Collegial Support

The Aroha School teachers had a strong understanding of ECE curriculum, Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017), and this underpinned all aspects of their teaching and learning programmes in their classroom, including the use of Learning Stories, as this participant explained:

In this New Entrant space there has been a push to have a Te Whāriki class. They wanted to grow it further so they sought a teacher with really good knowledge of Te Whāriki, and also the Learning Stories have come out of using Te Whāriki as Learning Stories are the assessment of Te Whāriki. (A2/I1)

Learning Stories seem the best way to be assessing children's learning. And if we are going to be using Te Whāriki, then actually this is the assessment framework that we should be using. (A2/I1)

Using Te Whāriki as the curriculum document to guide their planning practice meant that the teachers used Learning Stories because they align with the theoretical basis of Te Whāriki.

The ECE-based education of this participant meant that Learning Stories were the approach the teacher was familiar with, and over time primary-trained teachers also started writing them:

The [Te Whāriki] class started using Learning Stories first, because I come from Early Childhood and that was the assessment way that I knew. Since then, [all of the other primary-trained teachers] have started using Learning Stories. (A2/I1)

The ECE-trained teachers led a staff meeting to support their primary-trained colleagues learn about Learning Stories:

We split it [the staff meeting] into three parts, the pedagogical 'why' of Learning Stories, and then we did the 'what to include in a Learning Story' – the pedagogical non-negotiable stuff, and then we did some examples. (A2/I1)

We went through what we wanted Learning Stories to have, then the whole staff had a discussion, and the leadership team, and they took it to the whānau, and they have come back with most of the elements that we expected [to include in Aroha School's Learning Stories]. (A3/I1)

At Aroha School, the ECE-trained teachers used their knowledge of Te Whāriki and Learning Stories to help grow their primary-trained colleagues' knowledge of Learning Stories so that all teachers at their school could assess using Learning Stories.

### Valuing Holistic Learning and a Child's Dispositions in Learning Stories

The Aroha School teachers used Learning Stories to help them illustrate the value of dispositional learning. These participants expressed that dispositional and social-emotional learning is highly valued in their classroom, alongside academic areas such as reading, writing, and maths:

We really privilege the dispositional learning, so that whole stuff that is about children becoming lifelong learners and that whole development of skills across contexts and across time. We really do value that. (A2/I1)

I am recognising that the curriculum is not just about reading, writing, and maths. It is about being a person in a place, and having social skills, and being able to think for yourself, and being able to communicate your ideas. There is so much more in a Learning Story. (A1/I1)

We very carefully and intentionally choose what we write about. We think about what is the most powerful thing for this child at this moment in time – whether it is social skills, communication... We still have families asking when they are getting a reading book, so we can use [Learning Stories] as an educational tool, with a note to families "when they are doing this, this is them getting ready for writing". (A2/I1)



Aroha School teachers had a holistic view of learning and made very intentional choices about what types of learning they recorded in Learning Stories.

Learning Stories gave these teachers a way to assess and recognise their broader view of achievement and progress beyond 'ticking off curriculum objectives':

We are also capturing knowledge and skills and linking it to the curriculum where appropriate. But we always prioritise the dispositional stuff. We always look back before we write so we can see what dispositions have been focused on before and make connections so that there is this beautiful learning trajectory that goes across. (A1/I1)

That's another benefit of writing a Learning Story. It gives you a chance to really reflect on the learning; what the important learning is... We are looking for the dispositional learning in the Learning Story, rather than ticking off objectives. (A3/I1)

The teachers clearly expressed that they value holistic learning highly. Learning Stories help demonstrate to the reader that these teachers value dispositional learning as well as NZC Achievement Objective progress.

Learning Stories gave the Aroha School teachers an opportunity to show the learners, their families, and other teachers, what they value about the child's learning at school:

It's the complexity of the Learning Stories and the learning that you can show through a Learning Story. You connect to families, you show children who are capable and confident, you highlight the learning that is valued. (A1/I1)

The power of reading Learning Stories back to the children enables the children to know what we value. So this is the type of learning that is valued here: it's not just that you can count to 10 or you can do ABCs. (A2/I2.)

The Aroha School teachers viewed dispositional growth as important in order to empower learners to develop positive attitudes to learning.

#### Empowerment of Learners through Learning Stories

There was a particular focus in the Aroha School teachers' comments around the empowerment of learners. Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017) states that teachers will provide an "empowering curriculum that recognises and enhances [children's] mana and supports them to enhance the mana of others" (MoE, 2017, p. 18). Along with providing an empowering curriculum these teachers sought to affirm children's mana. They saw Learning Stories as having a role in empowering children to view themselves positively as learners:

I think empowerment is a really important point. Everything we do is linked to the principles of Te Whāriki. It's that empowerment thing – seize the teachable moment. I think about Max with his spiders. He has seen all these other children being able to draw these pictures and suddenly he's like "I can't do this", so he had a go drawing a circle and I said "what could you do now?" and he said "oh, I could make it into a spider". So we wrote [a Learning Story] about that in a really credit-based way. Look at what you CAN do! Look at you taking a risk and having a can-do attitude. (A2/I1)

I wrote a Learning Story about a child who barely ever spoke. He was outside with one of his friends and he called out to me "I'm just taking him to the office, he's hurt his leg!" And this was a long conversation and he was looking after his friend! This child is communicating! I can assess this learning with a Learning Story. And by documenting this moment I have empowered him because he sees a story of himself who is a good guy who looks after his mates. (A1/I1)

Empowering students to see themselves as learners who take risks, help others, and have positive attitude, while supporting them develop positive learning dispositions was important for the participant teachers at Aroha School. They wrote Learning Stories to document ways that their students were developing valued dispositions.

#### Teacher Collaboration when Writing Learning Stories

Aroha School participants described discussing their observations of children's learning with each other before writing Learning Stories because they saw it as important to be 'on the same page' about a child's learning:

We never write anything until we have all had a conversation about what we saw and we always read what the others have written. (A2/I1)

As well as consulting with each other, they also read previous Learning Stories before writing new Learning Stories.

Aroha School teachers aimed to show a child's progress over time with a collection of Learning Stories. This teacher explained how they intentionally choose what they assess, to best ensure continuity:

We never write without looking back [at previous Learning Stories], and we always make sure that we are having conversations about "oh you noticed that", or "maybe I could do this". So there is always continuity. What one might see, another might see in a different context. (A2/I1)

The Aroha School teachers intentionally made links between Learning Stories in order to show children's progress in different contexts.

These teachers wrote Learning Stories to show a child's ability to demonstrate a certain disposition across different learning contexts, as explained by this teacher:

The disposition might be the same but it is in a different context, or the learning might be growing, the knowledge base or whatever it is. (A2/I1)

These teachers used a collection of Learning Stories to assess children's dispositional and knowledge growth over time.

#### Summary of Aroha School's Key Characteristics in their Use of Learning Stories

As part of their transition to school programme, Aroha School teachers had a strong focus on the development of students' learning dispositions in Te Whāriki, through extended periods of learning through play. In the research interviews the Aroha School teachers spoke about valuing children's developing dispositions such as taking risks, helping others, and having a positive attitude. Students' dispositional growth was prioritised when writing Learning Stories and Learning Stories helped these teachers communicate the dispositional growth they value at Aroha School. The teachers shared their observations in professional conversations prior to writing new Learning Stories and they looked back at children's previous Learning Stories to see what had been written about in the past. This collaboration and review helped the teachers understand and assess children's continuing dispositional growth across a range of contexts over time.

#### Bluebell School

The themes and quotes that follow represent the views and programmes provided by the case study participant teachers at Bluebell School in their two group interviews held in August and October 2020. Bluebell School has an established learning through play programme implemented throughout their seven junior school classes (Year 0-3). After the school adopted their learning through play approach in 2014, the New Entrant class teachers started writing Learning Stories to assess the learning through play. Now all Year 0-3 teachers write Learning Stories to assess learning observed during play.

#### Key Characteristics of Bluebell School Teachers' Use of Learning Stories

Bluebell School participant teachers used Learning Stories as a way to communicate with parents about the learning observed during play and to allay any concerns parents may have about their child at school. Bluebell School teachers valued the way Learning Stories can show a child's progress over time, with students revisiting their learning recorded in previous Learning Stories and making links to what they are doing now. Bluebell School teachers assessed the NZC's Key Competencies (KCs) (MoE, 2007), the Achievement Objectives (AOs) in the NZC, and the Bluebell School values in Learning Stories. The teachers used the notice-recognise-respond formative assessment cycle to better understand the learning that they observed during students' play and to play appropriate future learning opportunities. Learning Stories were a key part of the teachers' planning and assessment cycle.

## Learning Stories as a Way to Communicate With Parents

Bluebell School teachers explained that initially they wrote Learning Stories to illustrate the observed learning occurring during their learning through play programme because parents were sometimes unsure of what children were learning while they played. Learning Stories helped to justify their school's play-based learning approach to parents:

When we first did Learning Stories here, it was for justification. This is why we play. Look at what your child is learning – play is learning! (B4/I1)

You are having a conversation with the parents too, through the Learning Story. I think the [parents] read [the Learning Story] and think "oh, so that's what you have done today". (B4/I1)

Writing Learning Stories helped teachers illustrate to parents the valued learning within the school's learning through play programme. Over time, the school's use of Learning Stories evolved. Sharing Learning Stories became a key method of maintaining regular communication with students' parents/whānau.

Frequent sharing of Learning Stories provided Bluebell School families with regular feedback about their child's learning, as explained here:

Because we are in the habit of writing two Learning Stories a week, they [parents] get them regularly, so they are getting a consistent sort of reporting about their child. (B3/I1)

Learning Stories provided a communication pathway between home and school, giving family/whānau frequent opportunities to hear about their child's learning.

Bluebell School teachers shared Learning Stories to allay parent concerns about their child. If a parent raised concerns – particularly when the concerns were about social-emotional needs or KCs– teachers used Learning Stories to illustrate the child's strengths in that area:

I actually do send home particular Learning Stories when parents have concerns around 'are they making friends?' Actually it kind of happens naturally when you are writing Learning Stories, because when you are writing about the KCs and the school values, you will usually always find a Learning Story you've written about that to show parents to stop them worrying. (B4/I2)

Learning Stories became an important way that the teachers communicated with parents. Learning Stories helped alleviate parental concerns about their child's learning and development, and they provided parents with regular communication about what their child was learning at school.

### Learning Stories Show Progress over Time

Bluebell School teachers added Learning Stories to children's portfolios regularly, over a period of two years or more. These folders provided a record of learning progress over their years in the junior classes and children reviewed these regularly:

Because they [the children] have the folders from last year, they're going back and seeing what they did in last year's classroom, and they can see what they did and make connections – like 'oh I am doing that this year as well'. (B3/I2)

And they make comments like they can build bigger towers now, or when they are doing simple origami, they say they can do bigger frogs now – they are talking about what they can do better now. (B2/I2)

The teachers saw this as an excellent way for children to make links to prior learning, and for teachers, family/whānau and children to see a child's learning progress over time.

Learning Stories provided opportunities for the teachers to spend time with their students, revisiting prior learning. Conversations between teacher and student helped children see their learning progress, as described by this teacher:

I notice this with Jimmy. He wanted me to sit and read some Learning Stories with him. Last year he played outside, played with the Mobilo. This year he's started to bring some academic learning into his play. He's writing books in his play. We had a conversation about how cool it is that he's bringing his academic learning into his play. And because the Learning Stories were there, he can see the progress he has made. (B3/I2)

Revisiting Learning Stories over time enabled Bluebell School students and teachers to see learning progress, including NZC Learning Area curriculum progress over time.

### Assessing Key Competencies and the New Zealand Curriculum Achievement Objectives

Initially when Bluebell School New Entrant teachers started writing Learning Stories, they made links to Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017) in their Learning Stories. However, Bluebell School teachers then started predominantly making links to the NZC (MoE, 2007).

[When writing Learning Stories] first it was Te Whāriki and KCs [that we assessed] and as it evolved it became linking to the [NZC] curriculum [Achievement] Objectives more directly. (B4/I1)

Now the teachers made links to AOs within the NZC (MoE, 2007), Bluebell School values and/or the NZC's KCs:

Teachers used to choose whether it is the KCs or the school values [when analysing a Learning Story] but we have evolved and we now link the observation to the [NZC] Curriculum specifically so we've always had lots of conversations as a team about what we are looking for in our Learning Stories. (B4/I2)

I can remember when I started this year [teaching at Bluebell School], that in a team meeting, [the other teachers] gave me lots of advice about how to write Learning Stories, and also that we include the Bluebell values or KCs, or a NZC [Learning Area] link. (B1/I2)

Bluebell School teachers see Learning Stories as an appropriate way to assess KCs progress and learning from NZC Learning Areas and AOs.

#### Learning Stories and the Notice-Recognise-Respond Formative Assessment Cycle

Bluebell School participants talked about following the notice-recognise-respond formative assessment cycle, as outlined by Carr and Lee (2019) in the book *Learning Stories in Practice*.

Bluebell School teachers have used this book to inform their Learning Stories practice after this formative assessment cycle was introduced to them during Professional Learning and Development (PLD):

We use the [formative assessment] cycle to help us with our planning and assessment, from that green book – Learning Stories in Practice. (B1/I2)

That was a key moment for us [during PLD with Longworth Education], talking about the notice-recognise-respond cycle. We talked about how that's the key to our Learning Stories. (B4/I2)

Understanding this formative assessment cycle supported these teachers when learning about writing Learning Stories.

Bluebell School teachers frequently used the notice-recognise-respond language when discussing the use of Learning Stories in their school, as seen in these quotes:

You are writing a conversation to the child, like “I have noticed that you can do this and this....” (B4/I1)

[In Learning Stories we write statements like] “I have noticed that during your play you have a passion for maths...” (B3/I1)

We write about what you [the teacher] have noticed. (B4/I1)

That's the key to your Learning Stories... recognise their learning, their interests, their urges, then you respond [by planning further learning activities]. (B4/I2)

The notice-recognise-respond language used by the Bluebell School teachers in the interviews indicates that the formative assessment cycle of notice-recognise-respond is embedded in their formative assessment practice. This participant is using the word urges, as described by Brownlee and Crisp (2016), meaning universal play patterns that are observed when a child plays.

#### Summary of Bluebell School's Key Characteristics in their Use of Learning Stories

Bluebell School participant teachers used Learning Stories to regularly communicate learning and progress to families/whānau. The teachers assessed NZC AOs alongside the KCs and school values. The teachers valued Learning Stories as a way to assess a child's learning progress over time. The

teachers and their students used Learning Stories to revisit previous learning experiences, giving children opportunities to discuss the progress they had made. Bluebell School teachers use the notice-recognise-respond formative assessment cycle in their practice and the book *Learning Stories in Practice* (Carr & Lee, 2019) helped them understand this assessment cycle.

## Coastview School

The themes and quotes that follow represent the views and programmes provided by the case study participant teacher Kate at Coastview School in the two interviews held in September and December 2020. Coastview School began implementing a learning through play programme in their Year 0 and Year 1 classes in 2018. This led to teachers looking for appropriate assessment methods that aligned with their play-based learning programme. Two teachers initially trialled writing Learning Stories, and in 2020, at the time of this research, all five Year 0 – 2 teachers were writing Learning Stories to assess the learning observed during play at Coastview School.

### Key Characteristics of Coastview School Teachers' Use of Learning Stories

Coastview School junior teachers were supported in their Learning Stories use by external PLD facilitators. PLD facilitators helped the Coastview School junior teachers develop a two-page Learning Story template with a dual focus: one page of a Learning Story written for the learner and a second page written for the family/whānau of the learner. Coastview School junior teachers developed systems to ensure accessibility of Learning Stories in their classrooms, including displaying Learning Stories in accessible ways for the children to see them. This accessibility created opportunities for learners to revisit previous learning experiences assessed in Learning Stories. Learners showed pride and enjoyment when reviewing their learning and these teachers saw Learning Stories as a way to grow children's positive dispositions that will help with more formal learning in the future.

### Professional Learning and Development (PLD) for Learning Through Play and Learning Stories

Coastview School Year 0 – 2 teachers received a significant amount of external PLD facilitator support while establishing their learning through play programmes and when learning to write Learning Stories. Coastview School's Kāhui Ako across-school network were investigating effective transitions to school, and because of this, the Kāhui Ako organised external PLD facilitators to help local primary schools establish learning through play programmes in their Year 0 - 2 classes. Support by PLD facilitators allowed teachers to gain an understanding of why learning through play is an appropriate teaching and learning approach for the Year 0 – 2 children at Coastview School and how Learning Stories could effectively assess learning during play-based learning sessions.

Coastview School Year 0 – 2 teachers were initially introduced to Learning Stories by a Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour (RTL B). RTL B is MoE-funded support for teachers to help with children’s learning and behaviour needs (MoE, n.d.). Kate commented that support from the school’s local RTL B gave them the confidence to trial writing Learning Stories:

Our RTL B support person introduced us to some samples of Learning Stories with some resources they gave us. So two of us gave them a go. We based ours on what they [the RTL B] had done, focusing on assessing the KCs, urges, that sort of thing as we were learning about it too. (C1/I1)

Guided by the RTL B, Kate began by assessing KCs through Learning Stories.

Coastview School teachers also had PLD from external facilitators Longworth Education, who also supported the Coastview School teachers with developing their Learning Stories practice. Longworth Education supports New Zealand primary school teachers to implement effective learning through play programmes (Longworth Education, 2019) and they supported Coastview School’s teachers to develop a dual focus approach to Learning Stories, as explained by Kate:

[A PLD facilitator] from Longworth brought her examples in and talked to me about how one page is for the children and one page is for the parents. So that is how that came about, the two sheet thing. (C1/I1)

Kate reported that writing Learning Stories helped teachers notice the learning during children’s play. The support of external PLD facilitators enabled the Coastview School junior teachers to understand who they are writing Learning Stories for and what information they were assessing.

#### Dual Audience Focus in Learning Stories

Coastview School teachers designed a two-page Learning Story template that all the junior teachers used. The first page was written for the child, and the second page was written for the parents/whānau (see the sample parent page in Appendix L). Kate explained their two-page Learning Story here:

We have a two-page Learning Story. On one page we have photos of the children. If there is student voice we have little speech bubbles and a little blurb with what they are doing [on page one]. That is for the child. We have another sheet which is more formal looking - with the urges and KCs highlighted. And it has links to the NZC and maybe oral language extension too. And where to next... (C1/I1)

Coastview School’s dual focus Learning Stories reflected their belief that Learning Stories are both a document for the learner and a document for the parents/whānau.

Coastview School teachers’ Learning Stories used colourful photos and student voice in the speech bubbles to create interest for the learners on the student page. On the parent page the teachers



highlighted applicable observed learning and made suggestions of ways they will extend the child's learning further:

The kids can see the colourful photo one [on page one], and the parents can see what the learning is [on page two]. So that is how we are showing the parents what they are doing at school, and what they are learning. (C1/I1)

Coastview School teachers used Learning Stories to illustrate to parents what children are learning at school.

In Learning Stories the teachers sometimes included social-emotional and dispositional learning as well as relevant links to the NZC within the child's play:

[In Learning Stories] we reinforce 'you were really good at sharing, taking turns or lining up patiently'. We put that sort of stuff in. Or 'you were being scientists and experimenting with such and such, you made a hypothesis'. And we record what is the learning that we can see – like where does it link into the NZC? (C1/I2)

There are links to the NZC that we see in their play, like if there are literacy and numeracy in the play, we make links to that. (C1/I1)

Coastview School teachers used the second page of Learning Stories to assess socio-emotional learning alongside NZC Learning Areas, as well as identifying a child's urges that were observed (see Appendix L).

### Planning for Future Learning Opportunities

Learning Stories helped the Year 0 – 2 Coastview School teachers plan for future learning through play opportunities. Kate described how Learning Stories helped the teachers clarify what children were learning while they were playing. They used this information to plan for further learning:

And for the teachers, I think they [Learning Stories] help clarify for us what the learning is, and where to take them [the learner] next; what we could try next. So I think that is really the purpose [of Learning Stories] and how useful they are for us. (C1/I1)

Kate saw the section of a Learning Story that plans for further learning as a helpful and important part of the Learning Story:

And especially [important in a Learning Story is] that bit of what will we do next? What are some other things that you can do to lift that learning or take it to the next place? (C1/I2)

For Kate and the Year 0-2 teachers at Coastview School, Learning Stories helped them analyse observed learning and use this information to plan learning experiences to further extend children's learning.

### Accessibility of Learning Stories in the Classroom for Children

Having the Learning Stories as easily accessible documents for the child was very important for Coastview School teacher Kate. In their junior classrooms, teachers displayed, shared and distributed Learning Stories in a number of different ways, giving children maximum exposure to these assessments. Kate explained that Learning Stories were available for the children in individual Learning Story portfolios, displayed as A3-sized posters on the classroom walls, and shared together during mat times and other quiet times with their peers:

They have access to them [Learning Stories], in their clear-file [portfolios], accessible to the children. They go and look at them with each other. The kids see the colourful photos and the children can share what they have been doing with each other, and remember and recall what they have done. (C1/I1)

Accessible Learning Stories enabled children to revisit their learning and have discussions about their learning with their peers and teachers.

Children showed great enjoyment when sharing their Learning Stories with their peers:

They always are very proud and they will add extra things. They get quite animated [when sharing their Learning Stories with others]. (C1/I2)

I'll walk in and I am delighted when I see a group of children sitting on the couch and sharing someone's [Learning Stories] folder. Plus, we have them blown up to A3 in the classrooms and I see the kids looking at them and talking about it. (C1/I1)

Kate explained that at her school the junior teachers see Learning Stories as a way to help children develop pride and confidence in themselves as a learner.

Kate noted that sharing Learning Stories provided opportunities for children to develop self-confidence and a positive self-image:

[When they share Learning Stories] they feel successful and they have confidence and pride. They see themselves as learners - it sets them up really well for their future. (C1/I1)

Learning Stories helped students reflect positively about their learning at school and use the memories from experiences documented in Learning Stories to have further rich learning experiences:

I think what is valuable is later they will come back and look [at the Learning Story], and talk about what they were doing. (C1/I1)

The children can share their success; they are remembering when they did that really cool thing, and they are able to go back out into the play and do something even richer. (C1/I2)

Coastview School junior teachers prioritised and valued the sharing of Learning Stories. When sharing Learning Stories with their peers, the children had positive experiences together and experienced feelings of pride and success.

#### Summary of Coastview School's Key Characteristics in their Use of Learning Stories

Coastview School junior teachers started implementing a learning through play programme and using Learning Stories to assess the learning during play after receiving PLD from RTLB and Longworth Education. The Coastview School teachers wrote Learning Stories for two different audiences: the child, and their family. They called this a 'dual-focus,' developing a two-page Learning Story format. Coastview School junior teachers prioritised the sharing of Learning Stories with students. Teachers displayed Learning Stories in their classrooms and children's Learning Story portfolios were easily accessible. Sharing Learning Stories together enabled the children revisit prior learning then extend the experiences in their play, and to grow and develop positive attitudes towards learning.

#### Common Attributes of Learning Story Use across Case Study Schools

Each case study school had a number of key characteristics that were unique to their school context. Additionally, there were several common attributes that every school identified as important in their Learning Story assessment practice. Common attributes included the learning through play approach by the participant teachers, the value of the strengths-based approach of Learning Stories, the value placed on KCs and dispositional learning by the teachers, and the collaborative partnerships developed with families/whānau through the sharing of Learning Stories.

#### Quality Formative Assessment and Quality Learning Through Play Programmes

In each case study school, teachers began implementing Learning Stories to formatively assess children during their learning through play experiences. The evidence indicates a strong link between teacher belief in the value of quality learning through play experiences and the use of Learning Stories to assess children's learning during play. Often the interview conversations about Learning Stories diverged into teachers sharing about the learning that occurs during play-based learning times, as illustrated here:

[The children] are actually really learning. It's really rich play and really rich experiences that are going to benefit the children. (C1/I1)

Children aren't just mucking around and playing at school. They are actually really learning (C1/I2)

It is play-based learning. It is getting away from the traditional way of teaching and just being aware of letting them lead their learning. (A3/I1)

All of the participants spoke with enthusiasm about providing high quality learning through play opportunities for their students.

Teachers from all three participant schools discussed how writing Learning Stories were an important part of their planning and assessment practice. Writing Learning Stories helped teachers better understand the learning occurring while children play:

So that is another benefit of writing a Learning Story. It gives you a chance to really reflect on the learning. What the important learning is. (A3/I1)

Along with developing teacher understanding of the learning occurring during play, writing Learning Stories required teachers to take the time to understand children's learning and interests.

These Bluebell School teachers described the link they see between providing quality play-based experiences and writing Learning Stories, questioning whether teachers can plan effectively for quality play experiences without taking time to observe (notice) what the children are doing in their play as part of writing Learning Stories:

I wonder if you can pull off good play, if you're not actually sitting there writing [Learning Stories] and analysing the play that they are doing? Can you provide good play if you haven't actually thought about what they are learning? (B3/I2)

Are you actually observing their interests and their learning and what their needs are [to play for quality play]? Because you can't actually sit down and write a Learning Story unless you have provided the child with rich learning opportunities. (B4/I2)

Learning Stories were a crucial part of their play-based planning and teaching practice, helping teachers understand children's play and plan quality play experiences.

Taking time to observe children's play gave teachers a chance to reflect on what children were learning. Teacher, Kate, explained how reflection time led to planning for future learning:

They [Learning Stories] help clarify for us what the learning [during play] is, and where to take them next; what we could try next, so I think that is really the purpose and how useful they are for us. (C1/I1)

Understanding the learning occurring during play was very important for the participants. Kate described how making links to the NZC is important when analysing a child's learning, as well as planning to extend the child's learning further:

What drives us is what is the learning that we can see – like where does it link into the NZC? And especially that bit of what will we do next? What are some other things that you can do to lift that learning or take it to the next place? (C1/I2)

The formative assessment cycle of notice-recognise-respond that the participants followed while writing Learning Stories helped the teachers to notice learning occurring during play and respond by planning further quality play-based learning experiences to extend children’s learning and interests. The teachers valued the reflective process of this formative assessment cycle, which enabled them to understand the learning occurring during play while documenting their observations in Learning Stories.

### A Strengths-Based Approach to Assessment

The importance of teachers writing Learning Stories from a strengths-based approach, also described by Aroha School participants as a *credit-based* approach (Carr, 2001), was very important to all three case study schools. The strengths-based assessment approach of Learning Stories, where the focus is on what a child *can* do over what they cannot yet do, allowed teachers to assess a child’s areas of strength and to celebrate this in the narrative writing of the Learning Story:

When you are writing a conversation to the child, like “I have noticed that you can do this and this, and you are really good at doing that”, it is that positive information about what they can do. (B4/I1)

We are writing them because it is a credit-based formative assessment so it moves away from seeing children as needing stuff, to really valuing what they can do. (A1/I1)

We link back to Te Whāriki and Whakamana empowerment principle of Te Whāriki, so it is credit-based: it is capturing the skills and the strengths and the dispositions of family and whānau. (A2/I2)

Learning Stories provided the opportunity for these participants to write about a child’s strengths that teachers noticed during play, giving value to the child’s strengths and interests.

### Key Competencies, Dispositions, and their Central Place in Learning Stories

Teachers from all case study schools discussed that when they began writing Learning Stories their focus for writing was on children’s dispositions, urges, or KCs:

Yes [we initially wrote about] KCs, urges, that sort of thing, as we were learning about it; what urge is this [observed during play]. (C1/I1)

These teachers described how, over time, their coverage extended to making links to the NZC objectives:

When teachers are starting the Learning Stories journey, they choose the KCs or the school values to write about, but we have evolved and we now link it to the [NZC] curriculum [Learning Areas] specifically too. (B4/I2)

Initially, we were using just Te Whāriki, as a curriculum, but when we got [primary-trained teacher] Rhea with her NZC knowledge, it helped us put another curriculum lens on that in terms of the NZC. (A2/I1)

The teachers started writing Learning Stories to assess dispositional learning or KCs but now assess a broader scope of learning, including assessing Learning Areas from the NZC (see Appendix M for a

Learning Story example that assesses the NZC Learning Area, art, and discusses the disposition of persistence).

### Sharing Learning Stories with Parents and Whānau

All three case study schools regularly shared Learning Stories with families and aimed to get feedback and engagement from parents/whānau about the documented learning. The schools all used similar sharing methods and had similar experiences when engaging with families through Learning Stories. Schools sent home paper copies of Learning Stories, shared Learning Stories via online platforms such as Seesaw, and showed family/whānau their child's Learning Stories portfolio when families visited the classroom. Participants spoke of favourable engagement with families through sharing Learning Stories:

Any parent I have asked are just delighted at the Learning Stories! (C1/I1)

[Parents said] lovely little things like 'oh my goodness I just love these little stories that capture these precious moments in time'. And they have really helped us build relationships with whānau. (A2/I2)

The [parent] survey showed that the parents loved our Learning Stories but they wanted them [Learning Stories] to come home more. So, [online platform] Seesaw allows us to do that. (B4/I2)

Teachers spoke of the online platform Seesaw encouraging reliable and regular family/whānau engagement.

When Learning Stories are shared regularly with families on Seesaw the teachers noticed that the parents were more likely to write a response to the Learning Story, compared to asking parents to write a comment on a paper copy:

We were making a black and white [paper] copy and sending it home, but I just sort of felt like when it's on a device [via Seesaw], I feel like there is more engagement. And then you've got the parent response there [recorded on Seesaw]. (C1/I2)

When I am sharing them on Seesaw, I get lots of comments [from parents]. (B3/I2)

Certainly when we were [sharing Learning Stories] on Seesaw then they [families] really understood what learning was valued here [at school]. (A2/I2)

Seesaw provided an opportunity for parents to view their child's Learning Stories even if the parent didn't come into school.

This dialogue between the Aroha School teachers describes how many parents in their classroom responded to Learning Stories that were shared via Seesaw:

A1: I reckon we had about 60% [parents commenting on Learning Stories via Seesaw], which is probably a really high amount.

A3: And they were always writing little comments back on Seesaw. They weren't just reading them, they would make comments back.

A1: We were getting heaps of feedback all the time. (A1,3/I1)

This teacher noted that while parents were making comments on Learning Stories shared via Seesaw they were even beginning to use similar language as the teachers in their responses:

We were getting families actually using the language that we use in our Stories– the language we use all the time. (A2/I1)

The comments we were getting [on Seesaw indicate] they [parents] were using the same language that we were using [at school] at home with the children (A2/I2)

When sharing the child's Learning Stories online with parents, the teachers observed parents actively commenting on Learning Stories. This even led, in one school's case at least, to some parents using similar language to that used in the Learning Stories when commenting. Sharing Learning Stories online allowed teachers to communicate with parents about the learning they value for their child. Even parents who did not regularly visit their child's classroom could view and comment on their child's Learning Stories.

### Individual and Group Learning Stories

All three case study schools discussed writing a mixture of individual and group Learning Stories for their students. Each school had minimum requirements of the number of Learning Stories that each child should receive:

We used to try to do two per term, per child (A2/I1)... But now the requirement is one really good, specific [individual] one. And there might be a couple of group ones. (A3/I1)

Across the team, we write a minimum of one per child, per term – but they can be a group. (C1/I1)

[The requirement is that teachers write] two a week. The aim is that. (B3/I1)

In terms of teacher workload with writing Learning Stories, although each school had slightly differing requirements for the number of Learning Stories written each week by teachers, on average at each school students received 1-2 Learning Stories per term. Some were individual and some were for groups of children.

The participants believed that individual Learning Stories are preferable because they capture the learning of the individual in more specific detail. However, because children often played in groups, Learning Stories were often written for groups of children involved in the play activity. Teaching in

collaborative teams was an advantage because each teacher wrote differently – some wrote more individual Learning Stories, while other teachers wrote more group ones, as explained by this teacher:

Between Elizabeth and me, we've found that I tend to write individual ones or a group of 2-3 and she tends to write groups of 7-8. Whereas I have gone and seen Sam in the sandpit and I've just honed in on him. Which is kind of good because we balance each other out. (B2/I1)

Teachers all write Learning Stories for all the children in their collaborative teams, not only for children in their own class:

There might be children from other classes in [the Learning Story] – so we would share that with other classes. So, we are collaborative. (C1/I1)

If teachers wrote a Learning Story for a child from another class, they passed it on to that child's teacher.

Although each case study school had minimum requirements for the number of Learning Stories children should receive each term, teachers admitted that some children received more than the minimum. The teachers also mentioned that some children tend to *fly under the radar* (teachers may not notice what they are doing during play) during learning through play sessions so their learning was not as frequently recorded in Learning Stories by the teachers. This issue will be discussed in more depth as a constraint, in the following section.

### Constraints for Participant Primary Schools when Using Learning Stories

The teachers in this research were overwhelmingly positive about the use of Learning Stories, speaking with enthusiasm about assessing using Learning Stories. However, there were some constraints noted about their Learning Stories implementation, including needing to establish systems to ensure all students have Learning Stories written in equitable regularity, the amount of time that is needed to write Learning Stories, and Covid-19 limitations during 2020 that limited face-to-face sharing of Learning Stories with families/whānau.

#### Writing Learning Stories for All Students Equitably

The participant teachers highlighted the need to have systems to ensure all children in the class had Learning Stories written for them regularly. Several participants mentioned that there are some children who were observed more often by teachers during learning through play sessions and these children ended up with lots of Learning Stories written for them, as explained here:



There is a minimum of one [Learning Story per child] per term, but some kids get two or three... if you're always in the group with someone doing something really exciting [you get more Learning Stories]. (C1/I2)

Children who were doing something exciting in their play and those who attracted teachers' attention were more likely to have Learning Stories written about them.

Additionally, as these teachers explained, there were some children who "fly under the radar" and were not often observed during play, therefore teachers may not write many Learning Stories for them:

Some children fly under the radar and it's always the same children, interestingly. Even though you know, I know they're on my radar but... (A2/I1)

That sounds really bad but there are children who I find really engaging but they fly under the radar as well because they're just so self-sufficient. They're not seeking your help very often. And you aren't there with the camera because they are doing their own thing. (A1/I1)

The time spent on one activity also makes a difference. Those children who were engaged in sustained, focused play more regularly had more Learning Stories written for them. This teacher mentioned those children who find it difficult to play in a sustained manner, and partake in what she referred to as "loose play" (unfocused, somewhat chaotic play) were less likely to have Learning Stories written for them:

The children I find tricky [to write Learning Stories for] are the ones who don't get focused [during play] - the loose play. (B1/I1)

The participants identified the need to write Learning Stories equitably for all learners and tried to ensure this happened.

Systems such as reminders on the wall for teachers to observe certain children and a visual chart on the wall, recording when a teacher writes a Learning Story on each child, supported teachers to write Learning Stories written equitably:

[A tracking chart on the wall in our classroom] is one of the things that has helped, because it is a real visual for us to go, from an equity point of view, this child, the child you could write a hundred Learning Stories about. But you know, that isn't equitable, and actually, who are the kids who we are missing. (A3/I1)

If you didn't write Learning Stories you might not notice those kids. I write their name up on the board to remind me to see what they are doing. (B3/I2)

Participants acknowledged that children who “fly under the radar” required a systematic approach, for example recording lists of children requiring Learning Stories, to ensure everyone had Learning Stories equitably. These teachers developed systems to ensure all children received an equitable amount of Learning Stories.

#### Time Constraints for Teachers to Write Learning Stories

Teachers from all three schools said that a lack of time was their biggest constraint to writing Learning Stories. There were two main time constraints raised by the participants. Firstly, Learning Stories took a long time to write, and secondly, teachers felt that they didn’t have enough time in their work day to write them or to write enough Learning Stories to assess every child’s learning:

Because there is no time – you can’t do them during school time! They take a wee while! So, time – yes, time. (C1/I1)

Time would be the biggest thing, I am sure it is for everybody. But I love writing them, I’ve got to say. It is my most favourite part of the job. But it’s time. Time when to do them. It would be great to have some release through the week to go and write them. (A2/I1)

Probably time – finding time to write them... Sometimes you leave it too long and you can’t remember because you haven’t had time. (C1/I1)

For these teachers it was difficult to find enough time to write Learning Stories to assess every child’s learning.

All of the participants said that they enjoyed writing Learning Stories. However, other school commitments such as meetings, planning requirements and other assessments reduced the amount of time that they had available to write Learning Stories in the way they would like to:

I would rephrase it from not enough time, to too many other distractions. There is just stuff I would take out if I could. And not do – and I would focus solely on Learning Stories in a lot of ways. (A1/I1)

The demands from within the classroom can get in the way. (B2/I1)

The pressure of other school commitments took away from teachers’ time when they could otherwise be writing Learning Stories, inhibiting their ability to write as many Learning Stories as they would like to.

#### The Impact of Covid-19 on Face-to-Face Family/Whānau Sharing of Learning Stories

In this research, teachers from all participant schools talked about ways they have effectively engaged with families/whānau by sharing Learning Stories. The online platform Seesaw was these teachers’ main method of sharing Learning Stories with families/whānau, because many parents did not come into the classroom. This research was undertaken in 2020 when schools had Covid-19 restrictions placed upon them. These government-mandated restrictions included a period of

lockdown when schools were closed and periods where family/whānau were discouraged from entering school sites to minimise the risk of Covid-19 transmission. Participants commented that these restrictions meant there were fewer opportunities in 2020 than in previous years for teachers to engage face-to-face with parents about their child's learning:

They [parents] don't come in and get involved with the children very often [because of Covid-19 restrictions]. (A2/I1).

We don't have many parents coming in now. Since Covid, we don't have many parents coming in. But when they do, the children will show their Learning Story folders. (C1/I2)

We have to think – a lot of our year has been Covid, so it's totally different this year, you know. (A3/I1).

Covid-19 provided unique and unprecedented circumstances for these teachers that affected their face-to-face communication with parents.

Although teachers adapted how they communicated with families under Covid-19 circumstances, they wondered if there they could do more to build effective learning partnerships between family/whānau and school:

We have got their [portfolio] books here, and this year we have said to them that they can take the books home, but not a lot of kids have been doing that. So that is definitely something we can keep thinking about what that looks like. (A2/I2)

Covid-19 was a unique constraint that reduced the number of parents coming into their child's classrooms in 2020, minimising opportunities for face-to-face sharing of Learning Stories.

Restrictions meant that sharing Learning Stories online through platforms such as Seesaw has become the main way teachers communicated and shared Learning Stories with parents.

## Summary

This chapter has outlined how these participant primary school teachers used Learning Stories in their assessment practice. Participants were enthusiastic about using Learning Stories and appreciated their strengths-based approach that assesses what a child *can* do. Learning Stories helped these teachers recognise the learning occurring during play and plan for possible future learning opportunities. Teachers used Learning Stories to assess both dispositional (Key Competency) learning and New Zealand Curriculum Learning Area progress. Learning Stories helped strengthen connections between teachers, students, and family/whānau. Parents appreciated the regular sharing of Learning Stories and contributed comments about the recorded learning. A lack of time to write Learning Stories was a major constraint identified by participants, as well as ensuring

that all children had Learning Stories written equitably for them. The implications of these findings will be discussed in the following chapter.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

This chapter discusses the significance of the main findings of this research, including how Learning Stories make valued learning visible, how Learning Stories can help teachers implement quality learning through play programmes, and the formative assessment cycle that supports teachers when writing Learning Stories. Student experiences of having Learning Stories written about their learning is discussed, including the benefit of the strengths-based approach. This chapter also discusses the Sociocultural theoretical perspective that underpins the practice of these participant teachers and how Learning Stories can help schools address the National Education and Learning Priorities (MoE, 2020a).

### Making Valued Learning Visible in Learning Stories

Through the writing and content – process and record – of Learning Stories, these primary school teachers documented learning that is valued in their classrooms and, in this sense, Learning Stories are an assessment that makes valued learning visible (MoE, 2017). The participant teachers used Learning Stories to assess both dispositional (or Key Competency) growth and NZC (MoE, 2007) Learning Area progress, and they discussed how Learning Stories helped them make what was valued in their school setting visible. In fact, there was more of a focus on socio-emotional development when writing Learning Stories than on NZC Learning Area progress.

In *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) it states, “assessment makes valued learning visible” (p. 63). For the participant teachers, *valued learning* included socio-emotional development and the growth of learning dispositions as well as learning in NZC Learning Areas. As one Aroha School teacher said, “[In Learning Stories] I am recognising that the curriculum is not just about reading, writing, and maths. It is about being a person in a place, and having social skills, and being able to think for yourself, and being able to communicate your ideas” (A1/I1). Learning valued went beyond the NZC Learning Areas of English and mathematics. The evidence suggests that valued learning for all the research participants included socio-emotional growth and the development of learning dispositions or Key Competencies (KCs) and this learning was made visible in the Learning Stories they recorded.

Dispositions, referred to in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017, p. 22) as “tendencies to respond to situations in particular ways” are intended to align with the KCs from the NZC, which states that KCs draw “on knowledge, attitudes, and values in ways that lead to action” (MoE, 2007, p. 12). Dispositions or KCs are the way a learner acts, or responds, to situations. Using their dispositions or KCs, learners combine their knowledge and skills to respond and contribute effectively as actively involved members of their community.

The research evidence shows that student development of KCs was very important for the participant teachers. Comments such as “It gives you a chance to really reflect on what the important learning is... We are looking for the dispositional learning in the Learning Story, rather than ticking off objectives” (A3/I1) were common. The importance that teachers from all three case study schools placed on KC progress aligns with the Ministry of Education’s (MoE’s) view, who state that dispositional skills are key in helping learners become equipped to learn well throughout their lives (MoE, 2020b). This view is further substantiated by Hattie (2009), who believes that “dispositions to learning should be key performance indicators of the outcomes of schooling” (p. 40). The participants, the MoE, and Hattie view KCs as a crucial part of learning at school, and for Hattie, the most important learning for children at school.

Participant teachers described making links to Learning Areas and Achievement Objectives (AOs) from the NZC, usually alongside KC progress within the same Learning Story. An example of the links to both the NZC and dispositional progress is seen in the Learning Story “Ricky the Artist” (see Appendix M and p. 59 of this thesis). Ricky had been learning about the artist Paul Klee in art lessons and Ricky transferred this learning into his play by choosing to experiment with Paul Klee’s artistic style and draw his Mum. In Ricky’s Learning Story, the writer highlights the disposition of ‘persistence’, stating “This is a great example of your ability to persist with difficulty, Ricky. I have observed [you demonstrating] this disposition often when you are challenged”, as well as linking to the NZC Learning Area – ‘Visual Art, Level 1’, recording the NZC Visual Arts Level 1 AO, “Investigate visual ideas in response to a variety of motivations”. This Learning Story shows how Learning Stories can assess KCs and NZC Learning Areas or AOs together in one document. Carr and Lee (2012) discuss the concept of assessing both dispositional learning and curriculum progress together in one Learning Story, stating that teachers are able to assess both areas while illustrating the interaction of the learner with the environment, other people and varying resources in the written narrative, while also including the context for the learning.

The concept of assessing both KCs and NZC Learning Area progress in Learning Stories has been substantiated in previous New Zealand research by Smith et al. (2011). In their research, the teacher successfully used Learning Stories to assess both KCs and English (reading and writing) and mathematics learning. Smith et al. found that the teachers could illustrate the relationship between KCs and NZC Learning Areas in Learning Stories. Smith et al.’s findings have been reinforced by the findings of this research, where Learning Stories provided participants with an effective way to assess both KCs and NZC Learning Areas, making both areas of valued learning visible.

## Learning Stories and Teacher Practice

There was a strong link between the implementation of quality play-based learning programmes and the use of Learning Stories throughout the research evidence. All three case study schools had learning through play programmes operating in their junior classes and the teachers discussed providing play-based experiences in their classes using a variety of descriptors, including 'rich play', 'quality play', 'good play', and 'rich learning opportunities'. For consistency and clarity, I will use the term *quality play* when discussing how play-based learning experiences were described by participants.

It is the learning that results from play that makes it quality play. When commenting on quality play in their classrooms, participants were referring to activities that led to new learning for students. As one teacher articulated "This is why we play. Look at what your child is learning – play is learning!" (B4/I1). This teacher's view aligns with the view of Gronlund (2010), who writes that quality play at primary school is "purposeful, high-level, mature play, the kind of play that tells 'grand stories'" (p. 12), where students connect socially and play for sustained periods of time. When children engage in play for sustained periods they immerse themselves in the experience and this type of sustained engagement is most likely to lead to learning and progress. Gronlund adds that quality play helps children learn skills such as self-regulation, language, and abstract thinking. In this research, teachers viewed quality play as purposeful, with children learning dispositional skills similar to those outlined by Gronlund while they played.

Implementing quality play-based learning programmes required participant teachers to be intentional in their planning and teaching decisions, using evidence from observations of children during play to help them design future play experiences that would support students' continued learning and progress. According to existing literature (see Aiono & McLaughlin, 2018; Briggs & Hansen, 2012; Epstein, 2014; Gronlund, 2010; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2008), intentional teaching and learning through play begins with teacher observation of the play and this is also evident in the research findings, where teachers discussed the importance of observing children during play so they could understand children's strengths, urges, and interests.

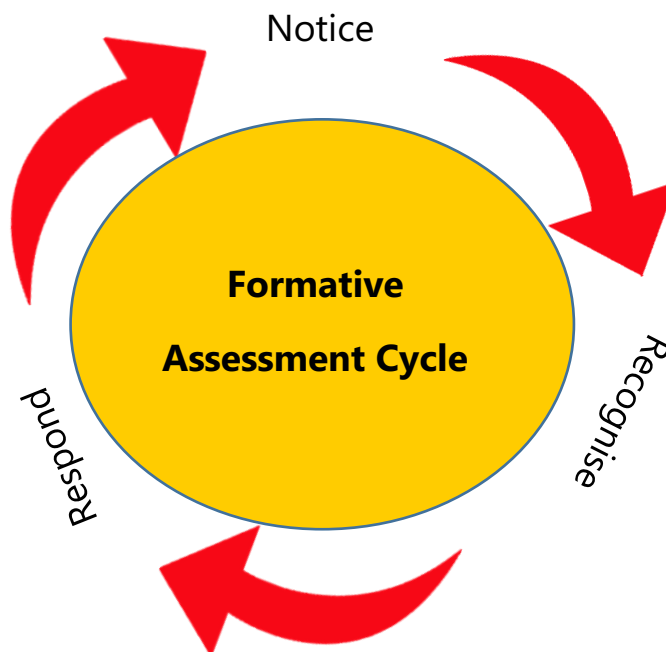
When discussing the need to plan for children's learning through play, one participant said "and especially [important in Learning Stories is] that bit of what will we do next? What are some other things that you can do to lift that learning or take it to the next place? (C1/I2). This view is consistent with Aiono & McLaughlin's (2018) research. These authors state that effective play-based teachers will plan activities "with the intention to provoke children's engagement and discovery of a

specific area of the NZC... that assessment data has identified as needing covering within student play” (p. 45). Teachers should be intentional when planning for play, using the assessment evidence gathered during their observations of play and is an important element of quality learning through play programmes.

The participant teachers provided quality learning through play programmes for their students by observing the children’s play, analysing the observed learning from the play, then intentionally planning activities to further extend children’s learning. This cycle of observation, analysis of learning, and planning for further learning aligns with the continuous process of the notice-recognise-respond formative assessment cycle, illustrated in Figure 2 (Bell & Cowie, 1997; Carr & Lee, 2019; Lee, 2019; MoE, 2004c, 2017).

**Figure 2**

*Notice-Recognise-Respond Formative Assessment Cycle*





When writing Learning Stories the participants noticed, recognised, and responded to the learning occurring during play in their classrooms. During the research interviews, teachers made several references to noticing and recognising learning during play-based learning times, and to responding by planning further learning opportunities to extend a child's learning. For example, this Bluebell School teacher said, "that's the key to your Learning Stories... recognise their learning, their interests, their urges, then you respond" (B4/I2). These teachers took time to notice what a child was doing in their play, recognise the learning, and respond by planning potential future learning experiences. Consistent with Bell and Cowie's (1997) observation, not everything that is noticed is recognised and not everything that is recognised is responded to. Only some of what is recognised is recorded. Participant teachers recorded some of the observed learning using Learning Stories. The notice-recognise-respond cycle can support teachers through a process of identifying children's learning and planning for further quality play-based experiences.

Specific formative planning is contained in the "next steps" or "opportunities and possibilities" section of a Learning Story (Cameron et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2013). These future planned experiences are sometimes called "play invitations" (Aiono & McLaughlin, 2018, p. 7) because they are designed to invite, not compel, children to extend their learning. The process of writing Learning Stories can help primary school teachers plan play invitations for potential future learning by identifying future learning possibilities and they provide teachers with a format to record ideas for future learning experiences. The word *potential* is important here, acknowledging the ambiguity that can exist during learning through play and the often-shifting nature of children's interests. Although a child may show interest in an area on one day, they may not show any interest the next day and this is acceptable in quality play-based programmes where children lead their learning. The literature shows that quality learning through play programmes in primary schools are child-led and teacher-guided (Briggs & Hansen, 2012; Pyle & Danniels, 2017) (see figure 1, p. 24 of this thesis for an example continuum of play in primary schools), and Sands (2017) reminds us that "it is the learner who decides what to learn, not the teacher" (p. 4). The formative assessment process of noticing and recognising learning during play and documenting some of the observed learning in Learning Stories supported these teachers' implementation of quality learning through play programmes and helped them plan for the interests and learning of students in their play-based contexts.

The research evidence suggests a link between these participants' pedagogical understanding and implementation of quality learning through play programmes, their use of the notice-recognise-respond formative assessment cycle, and the use of Learning Stories. The process of writing

Learning Stories (following the notice-recognise-respond cycle) has the potential to assist primary school teachers as they learn how to implement quality play-based learning programmes. Because teaching and learning through play is a relatively new concept that is rapidly growing in popularity in New Zealand primary schools (Davis, 2018; Hedges, 2018) and because it is a new teaching approach for many teachers, some teachers are only beginning to learn how to teach effectively through play.

Many New Zealand primary school teachers are still learning what quality play-based practices are and what their role is during the play (Aiono et al., 2019). Hedges (2018) states that as primary school teachers make a pedagogical shift towards teaching through play, it is important for them to gain a strong research-based understanding of what effective play-based programmes are like. The process of writing Learning Stories can help teachers new to learning through play programmes better recognise the learning occurring during play and help them develop knowledge of what quality play looks like. This Bluebell School teacher saw the role of Learning Stories as crucial in learning through play programmes, stating “I wonder if you can pull off good play, if you’re not actually sitting there writing [Learning Stories] and analysing the play that they are doing? Can you provide good play if you haven’t actually thought about what they are learning? (B3/I2). This teacher articulates how Learning Stories can help teachers to analyse quality play by thinking deeply about the child’s learning and then using this information to plan quality play invitations.

To write Learning Stories, teachers must recognise the significance of their observations (what the learning and progress is). Each time a teacher recognises a child’s significant learning during play, they build a greater understanding of the child - for example what the child’s strengths, urges, and interests are, who they play with, how they interact with others, and what dispositions they exhibit when challenges occur. These observations can also help teachers build an understanding of what quality play looks like in action and documenting these observations in Learning Stories provides a record to refer back to. As teachers repeat this formative process, they will have many opportunities to reflect on learning occurring during play and this can support teachers as they develop their understanding of quality play-based learning practices as well as their holistic understanding of each child. For those teachers who are new to a learning through play pedagogy, are unsure of their role in play-based classrooms, or are learning how to implement quality learning through play programmes, Learning Stories can help them develop an understanding of play-based teaching practice while they also deepen their understanding of each child’s unique strengths and interests. Equally, Learning Stories can support even the most experienced play practitioners to continually learn more about their students.

Collegial collaboration and support is another way that primary school teachers can grow and learn as play-based practitioners, including learning how to write Learning Stories. Research participants worked collaboratively (with most participants teaching in collaborative classrooms alongside 2-3 colleagues) and supported each other as they developed a learning through play pedagogy in each of their primary schools. This collegiality included helping new teachers understand how to write Learning Stories, writing Learning Stories for children in other teachers' classes, and sharing knowledge about Te Whāriki (2017) and NZC (2007) content with colleagues. Networking with Early Childhood Education (ECE) colleagues is beneficial for primary school teachers implementing learning through play programmes because ECE teachers are experienced in providing quality learning through play opportunities for children (Hedges, 2018). Interestingly, two case study schools had ECE-trained teachers working in their junior teaching teams. An Aroha School ECE-trained teacher explained how she supported her primary-trained colleagues with learning how to write Learning Stories by running a staff meeting: "We split [the staff meeting] into three parts, the pedagogical 'why' of Learning Stories, and then we did the 'what to include in a Learning Story' – the pedagogical non-negotiable stuff, and then we did some examples" (A2/I1). This ECE-trained teacher used her ECE knowledge to teach her primary-trained colleagues about Learning Stories.

There is further scope for ECE-experienced teachers to support primary-trained teaching colleagues in their development of quality play-based learning programmes and the use of Learning Stories in New Zealand primary schools. Primary schools who are committed to a learning through play pedagogy can employ ECE-trained teachers in their schools, and this was evident in two case study schools. Alternatively, if no ECE-trained teachers are employed in a primary school, teachers can build relationships with local ECE Centres and be supported by these ECE teachers as they develop their Learning Stories practice, collaboratively sharing their varied curriculum knowledge and helping develop effective Learning Story and play-based learning practice in primary schools.

These primary school teachers who were using Learning Stories in their assessment practice as part of their learning through play pedagogy demonstrated beliefs about teaching and learning that went beyond simply using a new, different assessment method. These teachers have developed a holistic strengths-based pedagogy of teaching, learning and assessment that aligns with a Socioculturally-influenced perspective of quality education practice. Research participants consistently spoke about children in their classes from a strengths-based perspective and they used Learning Stories to document these strengths. As they described learning episodes in the research interviews they described the context for students' learning, demonstrating a belief that learning "cannot be separated from its social and cultural-historical context" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 50). These participants

were not just providing developmentally-appropriate play-based activities for children, they were demonstrating a teaching pedagogy that aligns with Sociocultural Theory, where a child's *backstory* (their family, culture and historical background) is valued in the classroom programme, children are seen from a strength's based perspective, and it is believed that learning occurs in all contexts, not just at school.

The pedagogy of teaching and learning through play that some New Zealand primary school teachers have developed, as evident in this research, is in stark contrast to the National Standards-driven agenda that dominated primary school teaching and assessment practice between 2010-2017 (Lee & Lee, 2015). The research findings indicate that some teachers and schools are moving away from teaching programmes that prioritise numeracy and literacy achievement above other Learning Areas and are instead valuing a broader view of learning that includes KCs and dispositional learning, and are teaching and assessing in a way that aligns with Sociocultural Theory, valuing children's diverse strengths and interests and allowing children to lead their learning through play. Learning Stories are an assessment that allows teachers to make this valued learning visible and are an assessment approach that aligns with the Sociocultural theoretical lens of how these teachers view learning.

### Learning Stories and Student Experience

The research evidence shows that the strengths-based approach of Learning Stories, which highlights what a child *can* do, rather than what they can't yet do can be of considerable benefit for children. As this Aroha School teacher explained, Learning Stories "move away from seeing children as needing stuff, to really valuing what they can do" (A1/I1). Learning Stories highlight the things students do well at school, helping students view themselves as competent learners. According to Clarke et al. (2001), when students experience success this can have "a 'knock-on' effect from one area of achievement to another" (p. 140), also developing children's self-confidence. When learners view themselves as capable of experiencing success they are more likely to further their learning. Learning Stories make students' strengths visible in a way that can help them develop a sense of pride.

Revisiting Learning Stories can be a catalyst for new learning, as described by this teacher: "[When revisiting Learning Stories] the children are remembering when they did that really cool thing, and they are able to go back out into the play and do something even richer" (C1/I2). Teachers can support and encourage children to revisit Learning Stories by prioritising time in the school day for sharing and reflecting on the documented learning with them. Sharing Learning Stories regularly alongside their teachers and peers can help children understand their learning and progress while they discuss and reflect on their learning together.

Learning Stories must be collated and stored in accessible ways so children can revisit and review their recorded learning. This was raised as being particularly important for Kate from Coastview School, who prioritised the collaborative sharing of Learning Stories and ensured accessibility of Learning Stories in her classroom, both in portfolios and displayed on the classroom walls: “I am delighted when I see a group of children sitting on the couch and sharing someone’s [Learning Stories] folder. Plus, we have them blown up to A3 in the classrooms and I see the kids looking at them and talking about it” (C1/I1). Carr and Lee (2019) confirm Kate’s view, explaining that accessible Learning Stories “enable a collaborative conversation about progress and what might come next” (p. 130). Storing and displaying Learning Stories in accessible ways encourages conversations about learning and progress between students and teachers, helping children reflect on their learning.

Including student perspectives (student voice) in Learning Stories is important because it shows that student views are valued. Student voice can be included in Learning Stories by recording what a child says during play and/or inviting the child to add their perspective during the Learning Story writing process. Children may provide explanations of decisions they made or they may contribute how they felt about the episode of learning. Cowie and Carr (2008) write that “jointly authored storying highlights for teachers and parents the scope of children’s appreciation and analysis of their own learning” (p. 113). Including the child’s perspective can help teachers and families to understand what the children thinks about their learning and this is an important Learning Story component that primary school teachers should consider.

Some elements of student involvement in the Learning Story process were evident in the assessment practice of the participant teachers. In the interview evidence there was little mention of teachers gathering student voice to include in Learning Stories. However, in some of the Learning Story examples provided by the participants there was evidence of student voice in the form of small amounts of dialogue between students or speech bubbles containing student comments included in the Learning Stories (see the Learning Story in Appendix M for an example of this). It is important to consider the logistics required for primary school teachers to capture student voice because participants indicated that they usually write Learning Stories after school hours. Teachers would need to develop systems during class time to ensure they capture student voice in order to give value to this important aspect of Learning Stories.

## The Potential for Learning Stories to Help Build Family/Whānau Connections in Primary Schools

Learning Stories make valued learning visible and primary school teachers should consider ways to gather and include perspectives of family/whānau to demonstrate that family contributions are valued too. When family/ whānau and teachers each share their perspectives on a child's learning with the other, they both gain an insight into the other's aspirations for the student and they can work together to support the child (Whyte, 2010). Learning Stories can help build authentic, meaningful connections between learners, their family/whānau and primary school teachers, as is common in ECE settings (Carr & Lee, 2012). When teachers build strong relationships with their students' families they are able to better understand a child's backstory, cultural context and family aspirations (Hood, 2018), leading to teachers having deeper holistic knowledge of the child. Family/whānau aspirations should guide teachers when planning learning experiences.

Participant teachers mentioned that parents "are just delighted at the Learning Stories" (C1/I1), that they "get lots of comments [from parents]" (B3/I2), and also that Learning Stories "have really helped us build relationships with whānau" (A2/I2). However, there was little mention in the research evidence of how teachers gathered parent perspectives about their child's learning, or how teachers were documenting family/whānau views in Learning Stories. From a Sociocultural perspective teachers must understand the "cognitive, cultural and social perspectives of the learner" (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004) in order to support a child's learning, and Learning Stories can act as a "boundary object" (Carr & Lee, 2019) to connect schools with family/whānau in order to better understand a learner's cultural and social context beyond school. Mutch and Collins (2012) discuss the need for schools to build reciprocal communication pathways with parents and other members of school communities, and there is great potential for primary schools to do this through Learning Stories, connecting meaningfully with parents by using Learning Stories as an initial talking point, documenting family/whānau views on the illustrated learning and learning that occurs outside of school hours as reported by family/whānau, and valuing family/whānau aspirations for their child by including their perspectives when future learning possibilities are recorded.

In the Ministry of Education's (2020a) *Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities* (NELP) for New Zealand primary and secondary schools it states that schools must "Identify and respond to learner/ākonga strengths, progress and needs, and learner/ākonga and whānau aspirations" (p. 4) by "partnering with their whānau and communities to design and deliver education that responds to their needs, and sustains their identities, languages and cultures" (p. 4). Partnering with families and communities is crucial for the educational success of learners. Hedges (2014) explains that schools partnering with families "recognises the diverse knowledge and expertise in families and cultures

that can provide foundations for later conceptual learning” (p. 201). Involving families in their child’s learning and assessment recognises the value that the child’s background adds to the child’s educational journey and provides a context for teachers to better understand the student’s identity, language and culture.

Learning Stories can help schools address this NELP (MoE, 2020a) because they document learner strengths, progress and needs (next steps) and can record family/whānau perspectives and aspirations. Additionally, sharing and discussing Learning Stories with families helps teachers learn more about students’ identities, languages and cultures – and teachers can use this information in future planning. It is clear from the NELP that the New Zealand Ministry of Education expects primary and secondary schools to build meaningful connections with family/whānau and use the family’s knowledge of their child, and their aspirations for their child, to design and deliver learning experiences that align with family aspirations. Learning Stories can document and build connections with family/whānau over time, working to fulfil the MoE’s expectation that schools will value children’s identities, languages and cultures in their curriculum.

## Summary

Learning Stories help teachers make what learning is valued visible to readers of the Learning Story, including the student, peers, teachers and family/whānau. These teachers’ Learning Stories assessed both KC and NZC Learning Area progress, frequently in the same Story, however, it was clear from the evidence that growth dispositions or KCs prioritised when these teachers wrote Learning Stories. Learning Stories were an effective way for these primary school teachers to assess learning in their play-based programmes. A link between assessing using Learning Stories and the implementation of quality learning through play programmes in their junior classes was evident, with teachers discussing their provision of quality play-based experiences and the use of a notice-recognise-respond formative assessment cycle (Bell & Cowie, 1997). Teacher collaboration was a feature of the participants’ teaching practice and there is further potential for primary schools to collaborate with ECE teachers as they develop their Learning Stories and learning through play practice.

Primary school teachers using Learning Stories and implementing quality learning through play programmes demonstrated a commitment to educating students in a way that aligns with Sociocultural Theory. These teachers valued a holistic, strengths-based approach to teaching and assessment where children’s strengths, urges, and interests, alongside their cultural-historical context, were valued in their classrooms. The strengths-based approach of Learning Stories enabled students to see what they do well and this helped develop their self-confidence as a learner.

Revisiting Learning Stories alongside their teachers and peers helped students understand their learning and progress over time. Teachers ensured that Learning Stories were accessible to students, collating them in portfolios available as paper copies in class.

Including student voice in Learning Stories can enable learners to add their perspective to the learning and demonstrates that learners' views and ideas are valued in their classroom and teachers need to consider how they can do this meaningfully within a primary school context. Additionally, primary schools can use Learning Stories to build meaningful connections between learners, teachers and family/whānau and this can help address the NELP (MoE, 2020a), where schools must connect with family/whānau in order to deliver a curriculum that responds to family/whānau aspirations and sustains their identities, languages and cultures.



## Chapter Six: Conclusion

This research investigated how primary school teachers from three cases study schools were using Learning Stories in their assessment practice. Learning Stories are a valued assessment practice for these teachers. Some recommendations for teachers interested in using Learning Stories in their own practice as well as for educational leaders who may be considering the use of Learning Stories in their primary school have arisen from this research and are outlined in this section. After suggesting some possibilities for future research and outlining some limitations of this research, I conclude with some final thoughts.

### Recommendations for Teachers and School Leaders

Based on the evidence in this research, I would recommend that schools and teachers who are introducing learning through play programmes also introduce Learning Stories as assessment. The notice-recognise-respond formative assessment cycle of Learning Stories can support teachers to better understand what makes play *quality* play, to intentionally plan to further learning during play, and to better understand the strengths, urges, and interests of the learners in their classrooms. Additionally, Learning Stories can support all teachers – even those who are experienced in teaching through play – to better understand their students’ strengths and needs. It is evident in these findings that Learning Stories are an assessment that align with a learning through play approach and Learning Stories are an appropriate way to assess learning occurring during play-based learning in primary schools.

It is clear from the *Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities* (NELP) (MoE, 2020a) that schools need to be establishing meaningful connections with students and family/whānau so they understand family aspirations for learners and so schools can identify and respond effectively to each student’s strengths, progress, and needs. It is also clear, as outlined in this research, that Learning Stories provide an assessment approach that can assist schools to address this NELP.

In order for schools to prioritise Learning Stories assessment, consideration needs to be given to the time it takes for teachers to write them well. Teachers need to have time allocated in their working week so that they can write Learning Stories effectively. Schools should consider allocating teacher release time to write Learning Stories, or set aside time after school with no other school commitments. Additionally, teachers and school leaders should consider introducing systems to ensure all children have Learning Stories written equitably. Teachers working collaboratively to write Learning Stories would also be advantageous in supporting teacher development of Learning Story assessment.

## Possibilities for Further Research

Some topics were highlighted during this research as areas that warrant further investigation, to further understand how Learning Stories can be used effectively as assessment by primary schools.

Areas for potential future research include:

- Investigating ways schools can use Learning Stories to help develop meaningful partnerships between schools and family/whānau
- Investigating ways in which primary schools can gather and document *student voice* consistently and meaningfully in Learning Stories
- Investigating the potential for primary school students to write, or co-write, their own Learning Stories

## Limitations of this Research

This research only expresses the views of the eight participant teachers from three case study primary schools in the central North Island of New Zealand. Due to the size of this project, generalisations cannot be made about other teachers' views and experiences. Additionally, this research examined teacher practice in using Learning Stories when assessing learning occurring during play-based learning times. Therefore, generalisations cannot be made about the use of Learning Stories in primary school classrooms who are not providing learning through play programmes. However, the research participants were all experienced and committed teachers who provided valuable and interesting insights about using Learning Stories in their play-based contexts. There is potential that the evidence that may support other teachers and school leaders who are interested in using Learning Stories in their primary school assessment practice.

## Some Final Thoughts

This study has shown that Learning Stories assessment can make a genuine difference for students in the way that they see themselves as capable learners. Learning Stories illustrate to students, their family/whānau and the wider community that valued learning at their school is wide ranging, not narrowed to academic achievement. Learning Stories make valued learning visible, highlighting the diverse strengths, interests, and progress of each student over time. When learners see themselves as capable of experiencing success at school, they are more likely to continue to want to further their learning (Clarke et al., 2001). The ability for Learning Stories to support children's self-belief and to support their development of positive learning dispositions is not to be underestimated.

When using Learning Stories in primary schools, success is not narrowly viewed as making 'expected progress' in literacy and numeracy. With Learning Stories, success includes dispositional (Key

Competency) growth alongside NZC Learning Area (MoE, 2007) progress, and through Learning Stories teachers can acknowledge and empower learners when they demonstrate valued dispositions. As described by this Aroha School research participant, “documenting this moment [where a student helped an injured friend] I have empowered him because he sees a story of himself who is a good guy who looks after his mates” (A1/I1). More than ever, New Zealand schools need to be creating life-long learners with positive learning dispositions (Carr & Claxton, 2002) – people who take risks, persist with difficulty, and help others. Learning Stories document this valued learning and can support students to understand their strengths and interests and to view themselves as successful students at school.

When contemplating the rigidity of formal tests and exams, Resnick (2017) questions which assessments are “capable of measuring the things that will make the biggest difference in children’s lives?” (p. 151). Learning Stories are one answer to Resnik’s wondering. As some primary schools embrace teaching and learning through play, and move towards a teaching and learning approach that aligns with Sociocultural Theory – viewing students from a strengths-based perspective, valuing their cultural background and seeing learning as holistic and wide-ranging – Learning Stories provide a valuable assessment that aligns appropriately with their developing pedagogy. Learning Stories can make a positive difference in children’s lives.

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## Appendix A: Types of Play, According to Play Researchers

Hughes (2012, p. 97)	Moyles (2012, p. 143)	Briggs and Hansen (2012, p. 32)	Sahlberg and Doyle (2019, p. 50)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Communication play</li> <li>2. Creative play</li> <li>3. Deep play</li> <li>4. Dramatic play</li> <li>5. Exploratory play</li> <li>6. Fantasy play</li> <li>7. Imaginative play</li> <li>8. Locomotor play</li> <li>9. Mastery play</li> <li>10. Object play</li> <li>11. Recapitulative play</li> <li>12. Role play</li> <li>13. Rough and tumble play</li> <li>14. Social play</li> <li>15. Socio-dramatic play</li> <li>16. Symbolic play</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Rough and tumble play</li> <li>2. Socio-dramatic play</li> <li>3. Social play</li> <li>4. Creative play</li> <li>5. Communication play</li> <li>6. Role play</li> <li>7. Symbolic play</li> <li>8. Deep play</li> <li>9. Exploratory play</li> <li>10. Fantasy/imaginative play</li> <li>11. Locomotor play</li> <li>12. Mastery play</li> <li>13. Object play</li> <li>14. Recapitulative play</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Artistic or design play</li> <li>2. Controlled imaginary play/socio-dramatic play</li> <li>3. Exploratory play</li> <li>4. Games play</li> <li>5. Integrated play</li> <li>6. Play using the whole school environment and beyond</li> <li>7. Replication play</li> <li>8. Small world play</li> <li>9. Role play</li> <li>10. Virtual play</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Physical play</li> <li>2. Play with objects</li> <li>3. Symbolic play</li> <li>4. Pretense or socio-dramatic play</li> <li>5. Games with rules</li> </ol>

# Appendix B: Outline of Interview Questions

## Outline of questions for Interview One:

1. Tell me about how you came to use learning stories in your classroom.
2. What do you see the role is for learning stories? – why are you writing them?
3. How often are you writing learning stories?
4. What do you find are the benefits that you are seeing by using Learning Stories?
5. Where do you see learning stories fitting alongside other assessments you may do?
6. Tell me about any difficulties or limitations you have encountered when implementing learning stories in your programme.

## Outline of questions for Interview Two:

1. Building on from last interview, is there anything that you have thought of since our interview, that you wish to add?
2. Tell me how learning stories have been received by parents and your school community.
3. How are you sharing your learning stories with whānau/parents?
4. Have you noticed anything with your children when they see their learning stories?
5. Do you have any formal guidelines, policies and procedures around the writing of Learning Stories? What guides you when you are writing a learning story?

## Appendix C: Invitation to Participate

Kia ora

This is an invitation to participate in a Masters research project titled:

*The Use of Learning Stories as an assessment and reporting tool in Primary Schools*

This research is being conducted as part of my Master of Education. The aim of the research is to investigate how primary school teachers are using learning stories as an assessment and reporting tool currently in their primary school classroom. This may lead to potential findings to support other teachers who are interested in the use of learning stories in their own practice.

Please note this work is not about assessing the quality of your use of learning stories. The research aim is to develop an understanding of what a sample of three teachers are currently doing in their practice, to then make findings that may support other teachers who are interested in using learning stories themselves. There will be no judgements made about effective practice in the use of learning stories by the research participants.

Attached to this invitation to participate is an information sheet that will provide you with further information about what participating in my research would entail. There is also a consent form.

Please take a few moments to consider participating yourself, and/or please pass this information on to any other teachers that are using learning stories in their primary classroom, who you think may be interested .

Thank you,  
Ngā mihi mahana

Amanda King



# Appendix D: Participant Information Sheet

**Date:** July 2020

**Project Title:** *The Use of Learning Stories as an assessment and reporting tool in Primary Schools*

**Researcher:** Amanda King

I am a qualified primary school teacher. I currently teach a Year 2/3 class at Oropi School, Tauranga, where I am also the Year 0-3 team leader. I have been studying for my MEd part time for the past 18 months and I am now completing my thesis as the final component of my studies. I have a strong interest in learning and teaching through play, and alongside this is my interest in qualitative formative assessment practices such as learning stories.

## **What is the purpose of this study and who is invited to participate?**

The research aim is to build a deeper understanding of how some primary school teachers are currently using learning stories as an assessment and reporting tool in their primary school classrooms. Teachers who are currently using learning stories within their classroom practice are invited to participate. I am seeking up to three teacher participants, each from different schools within reasonable driving distance from Tauranga. These teachers do not need to feel that they “know it all” or “have it right” with the use of learning stories. I am wanting to explore both the strengths and the difficulties of this approach, so any teacher who is currently attempting to use learning stories in their practice is invited to join my research project.

## **What would be involved if I choose to participate in the study?**

As a participant, you will be involved in two semi-structured (audio-taped) interviews at a time that is suitable for you during the period of August-December 2020. Each interview should take no more than 45 minutes of your time. The interviews can be held at your school, or at a different location of your choice. I would also like to view any other documents that you may wish to share with me in relation to your use of learning stories. This may include, for example: copies of learning stories that you have written, any planning, policies or procedures, or other related documentation, etc. The sharing of these documents is entirely voluntary, and they will be treated with confidentiality at all times. Parent consent for any copies of learning stories that you share with me must also be gained prior to you sharing them with me.

I would also be asking you to check the written transcripts of the interviews and make any necessary amendments before analysis proceeds. This is likely to take up to half an hour of your time. At any time up until two weeks after you receive the second interview transcript, you are able to withdraw your consent to participate without explanation. This can be done by contacting the researcher. If you choose to withdraw at any time, any material gathered will be destroyed.

## **How will confidentiality be protected?**

As a participant in this research you will be assigned a pseudonym for yourself and your school. No identifying information about you or your school will be used in the research report. All procedures regarding secure storage and respect for confidentiality and anonymity will be taken by myself to minimize the risk to participants being identified. However, given the size and nature of educational

networks in New Zealand, it cannot be guaranteed that an individual participant's identity will not be found out.

Please note this research is not about assessing you or your work. The aim is develop an understanding of how three different teachers are implementing learning stories in their practice. The interview questions will be framed to be constructive and appreciative.

Any information discussed or gathered will not be discussed with any staff members at the school you or I work at, or at any other school. If you are employed at the school the researcher works at, no information gathered will be used or discussed in your work role or within your employee/employer relationships or equivalent.

Due to Covid 19 contact tracing requirements by the government, I may need to share contact details of participants with relevant government agencies should they require this, in the event of a Covid 19 outbreak.

**What will the information be used for?**

The information gathered and analysed will be used in my MEd thesis, and in seminars or other oral presentations and conferences. These may be published online. The research may also be published in journal articles and other academic and professional publications.

**Do I have the opportunity to receive information resulting from the study?**

Yes. You will have access to an electronic copy of the thesis lodged permanently in the University's digital repository: Research Commons. You will also be offered a time to meet with the researcher at the conclusion of the study to discuss the findings.

**What if I have any further questions or concerns?**

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you want any further information, clarification or to have your concerns addressed: Amanda King, email [amandaking@oropi.school.nz](mailto:amandaking@oropi.school.nz) or 0212056422 evenings.

If you have any unresolved concerns at any time about this study please contact my supervisor Dr Kerry Earl Rinehart, School of Education  
University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton, New Zealand.  
Phone +64 7 838 4466 extn 4506 [kerry.earlrinehart@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:kerry.earlrinehart@waikato.ac.nz)

If you are willing to be involved in my research please sign the attached consent form and keep this information sheet for future reference.

# Appendix E: Consent Form for Participants

## Consent To Participate in Research

**Project Title: The Use of Learning Stories as an assessment and reporting tool in Primary Schools**

I have read the **Participant Information Sheet** for this study and have had the details of the study explained to me.

I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered

I understand that participation is voluntary and I may withdraw from the research, and any information I have provided will be destroyed, up until two weeks after I receive the second interview transcript.

I understand the intended use of the information gathered

I understand my rights pertaining to confidentiality and that anonymity cannot be guaranteed

I understand that because of Covid 19 regulations, the researcher may be required to share participant details with relevant government agencies

I agree to participate in this research

I wish to be advised of the initial published article

I wish to select my own pseudonym to be used in the research records, thesis and publications.  
My pseudonym will be:

---

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant School: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact details (Including email address):

---

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Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Additional Consent

I agree / do not agree to my responses to be audio-recorded.

I agree / do not agree to my documents that I provide being used in the analysis of the report. I understand these documents will not be included in the final report.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name and contact information:

**Amanda King**

[amandaking@oropi.school.nz](mailto:amandaking@oropi.school.nz)

Supervisor's Name and contact information:

**Kerry Earl Rinehart**

[kerry.earlrinehart@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:kerry.earlrinehart@waikato.ac.nz)

# Appendix F: Principal/Board of Trustees Participation Letter

Kia ora

I have approached a staff member of your school with an invitation to participate in a Masters research project titled:

*The Use of Learning Stories as an assessment and reporting tool in Primary Schools*

This research is being conducted as part of my Master of Education. The aim of the research is to investigate how primary school teachers are using learning stories as an assessment and reporting tool currently in their primary school classroom. This may lead to potential findings to support other teachers who are interested in the use of learning stories in their own practice.

Please note this work is not about assessing the quality of their use of learning stories. The research aim is to develop an understanding of what a sample of three teachers are currently doing in their practice, to then make findings that may support other teachers who are interested in using learning stories themselves. There will be no judgements made about effective practice in the use of learning stories by the research participants.

Attached to this invitation to participate is an information sheet that will provide you with further information about what having a teacher from within your school participating in my research would entail. There is also a consent form.

Please take a few moments to read through this information and consider whether you are willing to give permission for a teacher employed at your school to participate in this research.

Thank you,  
Ngā mihi mahana

Amanda King

# Appendix G: Principal and Board of Trustees Information Sheet

**Date:** July 2020

**Project Title:** *The Use of Learning Stories as an assessment and reporting tool in Primary Schools*

**Researcher:** Amanda King

I am a qualified primary school teacher. I currently teach a Year 2/3 class at Oropi School, Tauranga, where I am also the Year 0-3 team leader. I have been studying for my MEd part time for the past 18 months and I am now completing my thesis as the final component of my studies. I have a strong interest in learning and teaching through play, and alongside this is my interest in qualitative formative assessment practices such as learning stories.

## **What is the purpose of this study and who is invited to participate?**

The research aim is to build a deeper understanding of how some primary school teachers are currently using learning stories as an assessment and reporting tool in their primary school classrooms. Teachers who are currently using learning stories within their classroom practice are invited to participate. I am seeking up to three teacher participants, each from different schools within reasonable driving distance from Tauranga. These teachers do not need to feel that they “know it all” or “have it right” with the use of learning stories: I am wanting to explore both the strengths and the difficulties of this approach, so any teacher who is currently attempting to use learning stories in their practice is invited to join my research project.

## **What would be involved if I choose to participate in the study?**

As a participant, a teacher at your school will be involved in two semi-structured (audio-taped) interviews at a time that is suitable for them during the period of August-December 2020. Each interview should take no more than 45 minutes of their time. The interviews can be held at your school, or at a different location of their choice. I would also like to view any other documents that they may wish to share with me in relation to their use of learning stories. This may include, for example: copies of learning stories that they have written, any planning or other related documentation, etc. The sharing of these documents is entirely voluntary and they will be treated with confidentiality at all times. Any copies of learning stories provided to me will also have parental consent gained first.

I would also be asking each teacher participant to check the written transcripts of the interviews and make any necessary amendments before analysis proceeds. This is likely to take up to half an hour of their time. At any time up until two weeks after they receive the final interview transcript, participants are able to withdraw their consent to participate without explanation. If they choose to withdraw at any time, any material gathered will be destroyed.

## **How will confidentiality be protected?**

As a participant in this research each teacher will be assigned a pseudonym for themselves and their school. No identifying information about them or their school will be used in the research report. All procedures regarding secure storage and respect for confidentiality and anonymity will be taken by the researcher to minimize the risk to participants being identified. However, given the size and

nature of educational networks in New Zealand, it cannot be guaranteed that an individual participant's identity will not be found out.

Please note this research is not about assessing the teacher's work. The aim is develop an understanding of how three different teachers are implementing learning stories in their practice. The interview questions will be framed to be constructive and appreciative.

Any information discussed or gathered will not be discussed with any staff members at the school they work at, or with anyone else, except the researcher's supervisor. If the participant is employed at the school the researcher works at, no information gathered will be used or discussed with anyone working at that school at any time.

Due to Covid 19 contact tracing requirements by the government, I may need to share contact details of participants with relevant government agencies should they require this in the event of a Covid 19 outbreak.

**What will the information be used for?**

The information gathered and analysed will be used in my MEd thesis, and in seminars or other oral presentations and conferences. These may be stored online. The research may also be published in journal articles and other academic and professional publications.

**Do I have the opportunity to receive information resulting from the study?**

Yes. You will have access to an electronic copy of the thesis lodged permanently in the University's digital repository: Research Commons.

**What if I have any further questions or concerns?**

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you want any further information, clarification or to have your concerns addressed: Amanda King, email [amandaking@oropi.school.nz](mailto:amandaking@oropi.school.nz) or 0212056422 evenings.

If you have any unresolved concerns at any time about this study please contact my supervisor Dr Kerry Earl Rinehart, School of Education  
University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton, New Zealand.  
Phone +64 7 838 4466 extn 4506 [kerry.earlrinehart@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:kerry.earlrinehart@waikato.ac.nz)

If you are willing to have a teacher from your school participate in my research please sign the attached consent form and keep this information sheet for future reference.

# Appendix H: Consent Form for Principals and Board of Trustees

## Consent To Participate in Research

**Project Title: The Use of Learning Stories as an assessment and reporting tool in Primary Schools**

I have read the **Principals and Board of Trustees Information Sheet** for this study and have had the details of the study explained to me.

I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered

I understand the intended use of the information gathered

I understand the rights pertaining to confidentiality and that anonymity cannot be guaranteed

I agree to allow a teacher from my school to participate in this research

I wish to be advised of the initial published article

---

Participant's School: \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Chairperson BoT Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name and contact information:

**Amanda King**

[amandaking@oropi.school.nz](mailto:amandaking@oropi.school.nz)

Supervisor's Name and contact information:

**Kerry Earl Rinehart**

[kerry.earlrinehart@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:kerry.earlrinehart@waikato.ac.nz)



# Appendix I: Participant Information Sheet from Researcher's School

**Date:** July 2020

**Project Title:** *The Use of Learning Stories as an assessment and reporting tool in Primary Schools*

**Researcher:** Amanda King

I have been studying for my MEd part time for the past 18 months and I am now completing my thesis as the final component of my studies. I have a strong interest in learning and teaching through play, and alongside this is my interest in qualitative formative assessment practices such as learning stories.

## **What is the purpose of this study and who is invited to participate?**

The research aim is to build a deeper understanding of how some primary school teachers are currently using learning stories as an assessment and reporting tool in their primary school classrooms.

At Oropi School we have been using learning stories as an assessment and reporting tool for several years. As part of my thesis I would like to review our current practices and include these within our thesis.

Teachers do not need to feel that they “know it all” or “have it right” with the use of learning stories. I am wanting to explore both the strengths and the difficulties of this approach, so all opinions and thoughts on the use of learning stories in our school’s practice will be gratefully and openly received.

## **What would be involved if I choose to participate in the study?**

As a participant, you will be involved in two semi-structured (audio-taped) group interviews at a time that is suitable for the teachers in our team, during the period of August-December 2020. Each interview should take no more than 45 minutes of your time. The interviews will be held at your school. I would also like to view any other documents that you may wish to share with me in relation to your use of learning stories. This may include, for example: copies of learning stories that you have written, any planning, policies or procedures, or other related documentation, etc. The sharing of these documents is entirely voluntary, and they will be treated with confidentiality at all times. Parent consent for any copies of learning stories that you share with me must also be gained prior to you sharing them with me.

## **How will confidentiality be protected?**

As a participant in this research you will be assigned a pseudonym for yourself and our school. No identifying information about you or the school will be used in the research report. All procedures regarding secure storage and respect for confidentiality and anonymity will be taken by myself to minimize the risk to participants being identified. However, given the size and nature of educational networks in New Zealand, it cannot be guaranteed that an individual participant’s identity will not be found out.

Please note this research is not about assessing you or your work. The aim is develop an understanding of how different teachers are implementing learning stories in their practice. The interview questions will be framed to be constructive and appreciative.

Any information discussed or gathered will not be discussed with any staff members school, or at any other school. No information gathered will be used or discussed in your work role or within your employee/employer relationships or equivalent.

Due to Covid 19 contact tracing requirements by the government, I may need to share contact details of participants with relevant government agencies should they require this, in the event of a Covid 19 outbreak.

**What will the information be used for?**

The information gathered and analysed will be used in my MEd thesis, and in seminars or other oral presentations and conferences. These may be published online. The research may also be published in journal articles and other academic and professional publications.

**Do I have the opportunity to receive information resulting from the study?**

Yes. You will have access to an electronic copy of the thesis lodged permanently in the University's digital repository: Research Commons. You will also be offered a time to meet with the researcher at the conclusion of the study to discuss the findings.

**What if I have any further questions or concerns?**

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you want any further information, clarification or to have your concerns addressed: Amanda King, email [amandaking@oropi.school.nz](mailto:amandaking@oropi.school.nz) or 0212056422 evenings.

If you have any unresolved concerns at any time about this study please contact my supervisor  
Dr Kerry Earl Rinehart, School of Education  
University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton, New Zealand.  
Phone +64 7 838 4466 extn 4506 [kerry.earlrinehart@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:kerry.earlrinehart@waikato.ac.nz)

If you are willing to be involved in my research please sign the attached consent form and keep this information sheet for future reference.

# Appendix J: Consent Form for Participants from Researcher's School

## Consent To Participate in Research

**Project Title: The Use of Learning Stories as an assessment and reporting tool in Primary Schools**

I have read the **Participant Information Sheet** for this study and have had the details of the study explained to me.

I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered

I understand that participation is voluntary

I understand the intended use of the information gathered

I understand my rights pertaining to confidentiality and that anonymity cannot be guaranteed

I understand that because of Covid 19 regulations, the researcher may be required to share participant details with relevant government agencies

I agree to participate in this research

I wish to be advised of the initial published article

I wish to select my own pseudonym to be used in the research records, thesis and publications.  
My pseudonym will be:

---

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant School: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact details (Including email address):

---

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Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# Appendix K: Parent/Whānau Research Information Letter and Consent Form

Dear Parents and Whānau

My name is Amanda King. I am currently undertaking research as part of my Master of Education thesis about the use of learning stories in primary schools as an assessment and reporting tool. Your child's teacher is taking part in my research project. As part of my research, your child's teacher would like to share copies of one of your child's learning stories with me.

## **What will the learning stories be used for?**

If you give your permission, I will use these learning stories to help me better understand how teachers are using learning stories in their teaching. They may be used in my thesis, and in seminars or other oral presentations and conferences. These may be stored online. The research may also be published in journal articles and other academic and professional publications.

The learning stories will have your child's name removed, or your child will be given a pseudonym. Photos of your child may be used if they are included in the thesis or publications in the learning story.

If you wish, I can contact you when my thesis is published if your child's learning story has been included in the final product.

Please take the time to consider my request to use your child's learning story. If you give permission, please fill out the attached consent form and return it to your child's teacher.

Ngā mihi nui

Amanda King

**Consent For Use of Learning Stories in Research**

**Project Title: The Use of Learning Stories as an assessment and reporting tool in Primary Schools**

I have read the **Parent/Whānau Information Letter** about this study

I understand the intended use of the learning stories gathered

I understand that if a learning story is used in a thesis or publication, my child's name will not be used, but a pseudonym will be used instead or their name will be blacked out

I agree for my child's learning stories to be used in this research

I wish/do not wish (please delete one) to be advised of the initial published article if my child's learning stories are used.

My contact email address for notification is: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Parent Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Child's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Child's School: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# Appendix L: Example of Parent Information Learning Story page

## Urges:

*Gathering*      *Transport*      *Deconstruction*      *Construction*      *Huts (enclosure)*  
*Throwing/trajectory*      *Enveloping/wrapping*      *Connection*      *Posting*      *Patterning/ordering*  
*Families*      *Rotation*      *Orientation*      *Transformation*      *Climbing*      *Jumping*      *Messy*  
*play*      *Digging and burying*      *Playing with water*  
*Playing with fire*      *Running/chasing*

## Key Competencies:

Thinking: problem solving, showing initiative, making choices, being curious, asking questions, making connections, thinking creatively.

Using Language Symbols and Text: making meaning, following instructions, verbalising ideas, communicating, presenting, using language in different ways.

Managing Self: persisting, self -motivation, meeting challenges, being reliable, and resilient. Taking responsible risks. Know when to lead, can follow, and act independently.

Relating to Others: sharing, turn taking, co-operating, including others, asking to join in, helping & supporting others, negotiating, empathising, taking on different roles, establishing friendships.

Participating and Contributing: accepting responsibility, valuing diversity, respecting boundaries, looking after equipment, helping pack up.

## Curriculum Links:

### *Technology...*

Design and Building

### *Physical Education....*

Develop a wide range of movement skills using a variety of equipment and environments.

### *The Arts: Drama....*

contribute ideas using personal experience and imagination.

### *Maths: Geometry....*

identify & describe in own language some 2 & 3 dimensional shapes.

## Ways to extend the Learning:

**Language extension:** curved, straight, smooth, thick, thin, bottom, top, edge, side, face, corner, triangle, square, circle, oval, pentagon, hexagon, diamond, box, cube, cylinder, sphere, high, low, tall, under, on, beside, next to,

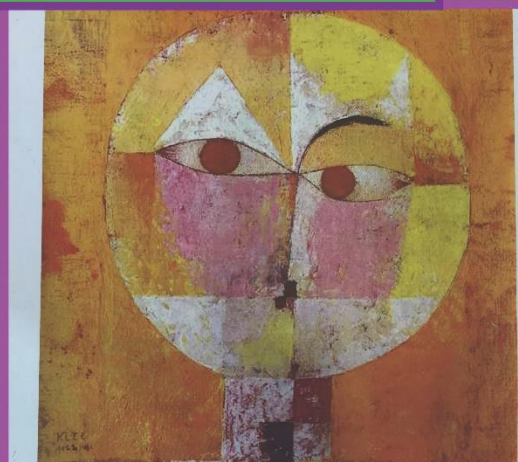
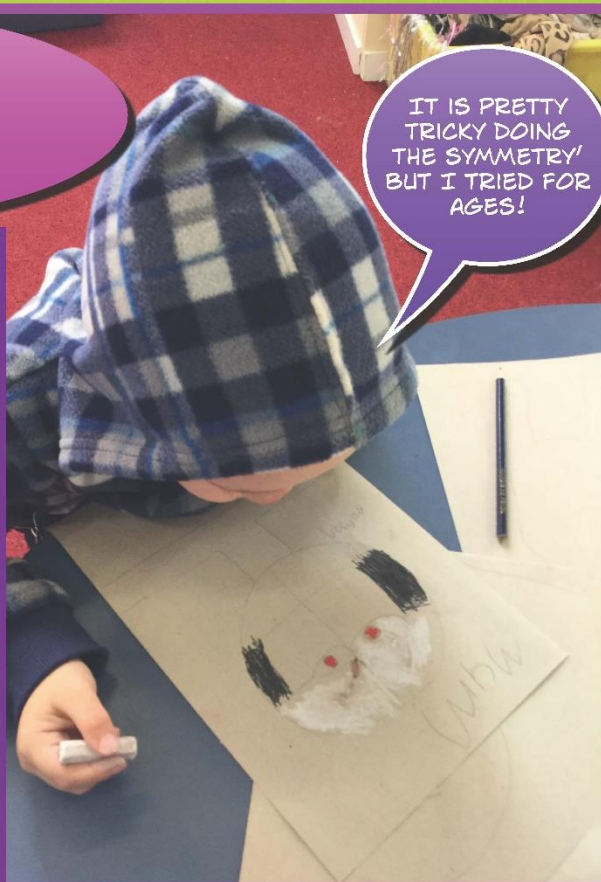
## Appendix M: Learning Story Example

### RICKY THE ARTIST

Ricky, today you worked for a long time making a pastel drawing of your Mum. This week we looked at Paul Klee's art and drew castles. In play you noticed his other drawings and decided to replicate his style. I was amazed to see your persistence and accuracy with your work. Well done Ricky!

This is a great example of your ability to **persist with difficulty**, Ricky. I have observed this disposition often when you are challenged. I also notice your ability to transfer a skill into another area. Ka mau te wehi!

**Visual Art, NZC, L 1:**  
investigate visual ideas in response to a variety of motivations



you looked at this Paul Klee original and decided to draw your Mum in the same style.



#### what could we do to extend your learning, Ricky?

Firstly, let's investigate other artists abstract styles. I wonder if we can find other ways that artists draw abstract images of people? Also, I am sure you will continue to amaze me with the way you persist when things are tricky... I can't wait to support you as you grow this disposition further, Ricky!