COMPLEXITIES OF ASSESSMENT: STRIVING TO GET IT 'RIGHT'

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Abstract

This qualitative research study aimed to take a closer look at assessment understandings and practice within one early childhood setting. Narrative assessment is a relative newcomer to early childhood education and teachers have been working with narrative assessments in the form of learning stories for just over a decade now. However, in Aotearoa New Zealand there is increasing discussion about the benefits of narrative forms of assessment, in particular the learning story framework as the main way to assess children's learning (Ministry of Education, 2015c; Mitchell, et al., 2015a). The research was undertaken at a time when there is increasing interest in the effectiveness of the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and related assessment practices .This study aimed to take a closer look at teachers' understanding and enactment of assessment guided by the following research questions: How are teachers assessing children's learning in early childhood settings? How do teachers make sense of learning assessments? What are early childhood teachers' understandings of learning assessments?

Key findings within this study suggest teachers were continuing to come to terms with the complexities of assessment and how to make it work within their context. Teachers were using a range of differing strategies to try and make sense of assessment and consulted key early childhood literature to support their understanding and use of assessment. These qualified, experienced teachers were striving to get it 'right' and shift assessment practices. Individually and collectively teachers were working towards developing a shared understanding of assessment priorities. Working in a team environment and valuing the perspectives of the learning community added another level of complexity as teachers worked toward increasingly meaningful ways to document children's learning using the learning story framework. Teachers found it challenging to place children's perceived 'deficits' in a credit based assessment model. Although teachers regularly discussed children's 'needs' together and with parents, 'needs' were often not documented within assessments. Balancing contrasting views of assessment and negotiating what should be documented was hard and at times teachers questioned the authenticity of documented assessment. Teachers wanted more time to talk with each other and the learning community as they continued to make sense of

assessment. Making assessment work was however a priority for this group of teachers as they worked toward getting assessment 'right'.

Informal and formal assessments of children's learning are often used to guide teachers' curriculum decision making processes. Well-developed assessment practices can have a profound effect on children's experiences and perceptions of themselves as capable learners. The responsibility for ensuring that teachers are up to the task of confidently using assessment lies not only with teachers themselves but also with: advice and guidance agencies, professional development and policy support, initial teacher education providers and induction and mentoring programmes. Strong support is required in order for assessment to reach its full potential as a powerful tool for decision making and implementation of the early childhood curriculum.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

This qualitative study aimed to take a closer look at assessment understandings and practices within one early childhood setting. The research was undertaken at a time when there is increasing interest in the effectiveness of the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and related assessment practices. My interest was in the practical ways teachers understand and are making assessment work.

Assessment is one of the key tasks teachers within early childhood education undertake and it is complex within any area of education. Formative forms of assessment are a relative newcomer to the early childhood sector. Although early childhood settings have been working with formative assessment models, mainly in the form of learning stories for over a decade now, teachers continue to negotiate assessment meanings and use with the learning community. Assessment is heavily connected to the curriculum, as what teachers choose to document within assessment is often guided by key aspects of the curriculum and what teachers value as learning (Mitchell et al., 2015a). The socio-cultural nature of the first early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* meant previously used assessment practices needed to change in order to be congruent with the principles and strands (Mitchell, 2011; Podmore & Carr, 1999, December). Duhn (2006) believes "*Te Whāriki's* effectiveness as a progressive curriculum depends on teachers' interpretation of it" (p. 196). I have had a sustained interest in early childhood assessment and continue to negotiate and modify my own understandings and interpretations of assessment.

This chapter introduces the context of early childhood education within Aotearoa New Zealand, setting the scene for how curriculum and key changes in the sector relates to assessment. The early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* will be briefly discussed as well as key agencies within the sector. Key beliefs and understanding of children and childhood will be introduced and the current political priorities as well as key changes influencing the application of assessment will be investigated. The chapter concludes with a description of my interest in assessment and personal assessment journey.

Early childhood education - Context

Early childhood settings

Early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand is diverse and settings differ in structure and philosophy. Settings range from sessional to full-day, parent-led to teacher-led, with a

wide variety of settings offering differing curriculum approaches (Macartney & Morton, 2013). Each service is guided by *Te Whāriki* to cater for their local community and services have a variety of differing operating structures and philosophies (Ministry of Education, 1996). Some of which include: kindergartens, community based education and care settings, private services, chains of corporate centres, playcentres, Te Kohanga Reo (total immersion Māori language nests for children birth to six years of age), and A'oga Amata (Samoan total immersion early childhood settings). A number of services also follow specific curriculum approaches, for example Montessori or Reggio Emilia. However, no matter the setting each service is required to follow the same bicultural early childhood national curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Participation

Early childhood is a non-compulsory area of education in Aotearoa New Zealand. The current Government is however aiming to ensure that all children attend some form of early childhood service before entering the compulsory school sector, with policies targeting funding to three and four year olds, with a 98% participation target (Ministry of Education, 2012). The Government is also targeting funding toward children who are considered at risk or in minority groups. These children have identified as Māori and Pasifika learners, learners with special education needs and children from low socio-economic backgrounds (Ministry of Education, 2012).

Current statistics on participation show that in 2015 a total of 96.1% of Aotearoa New Zealand children participated in some form of early childhood education (ECE) before beginning school (Education Counts, 2015b). When looking at statistics in relation to ethnicity the highest percentage was 98% of European/Pakeha children attending some form of ECE setting (Education Counts, 2015b). Participation of Māori and Pasifika children has increased, however at 93.8% of Māori and 91% of Pasifika children, this is still much lower than European/Pakeha participation rates (Education Counts, 2015b).

Te Whāriki

Te Whāriki was published in 1996 and is the first early childhood curriculum within Aotearoa New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 1996). Even though it was not compulsory at the time of publication the principles and stands of *Te Whāriki* were legislated through the *Early*

Childhood Education Curriculum Framework in 2008 (Ministry of Education, 2008). The principles of *Te Whāriki*, "Holistic development - Kotahitanga, Empowerment - Whakamana, Family and Community – Whānau Tanagata, Relationships – Ngā Hononga," along with the strands; "Well-being – Mana Atua, Belonging – Mana whenua, Contribution – Mana Tangata, Communication – Mana Reo, Exploration – Mana Aotūroa" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 13), must be implemented within the programme by all licensed ECE and care settings (Ministry of Education, 2008). Each service is encouraged to weave their own curriculum whāriki (mat)' integrating the principles and strands in a way which reflects the culture and beliefs valued by their community (Ministry of Education, 1996).

   Te Whāriki draws heavily on sociocultural perspectives, the writers also talk about the four kauri who guided the development of the curriculum (Alvestad, Duncan, & Berge, 2009; Hedges & Jones, 2012; Nuttall & Edwards, 2007). There is a mix of developmental, Piaget and Erikson and sociocultural perspectives, Vygotsky and Bruner as well as a direct connection to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory on page 19 of the curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996; Nuttall & Edwards, 2007). Although some aspects of the curriculum, in particular the notion of separating children into infants, toddlers and young children reflect developmental perspectives, *Te Whāriki* largely reflects sociocultural and ecological perspectives, which both view children as developing within the context of daily interactions with people in their immediate and wider social settings (Ministry of Education, 1996). Sociocultural perspectives of learning and development recognise the important role settings and relationships outside the early childhood environment play in fostering children's learning and development (Ministry of Education, 1996). Therefore focus is placed on the relationship between the learner and the environment (Carr, 2001). The curriculum acknowledges that learning happens in a range of social and cultural environments (Carr, 2001; Cowie & Carr, 2004; Feltham, 2005; Fleer & Richardson, 2004; Ministry of Education, 1996; Podmore & Carr, 1999, December), where children engage in "reciprocal, responsive relationships with people, places and things" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 14)

   Within ECE the implementation of *Te Whāriki* has seen greater focus on children's holistic development and learning in the context of their everyday experiences. The early childhood curriculum is strength-based and child focused (Ministry of Education, 1996). Emphasis is placed on supporting children's strengths, interests and abilities through purposeful and meaningful interactions with people, places and things (Ministry of Education, 1996). Children are viewed as confident and competent, active participants in the

learning process. Therefore teachers generally aim to provide environments and experiences which build on children's identified strengths, interests and abilities (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Relationships are a key principle of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). Collaborative relationships between children, teachers, parents, family/whānau and the wider community are viewed as important. The curriculum draws on Bronfenbrenner's ecological contextual model to illustrate this (Ministry of Education, 1996). Bronfenbrenner (1979) believed that a child's learning experiences are influenced by a range of environments and the relationships between these environments. Children's interpretations of their environments are the focus, including the way children perceive activities, and interpersonal relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Immediate settings such as the home and early childhood environment, wider settings such as the local neighbourhood, parents' work place and wider still, the nation's beliefs about children and education all influence the way "children perceive and deal with their environment" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 19).

Compliance, advice and guidance within early childhood education

The Ministry of Education and Education Review Office (ERO) are the two key compliance, advice and guidance agencies within ECE and have invested interest in ensuring that teachers are well informed about wise assessment practice. Being the "Government's lead advisor on the education system, shaping the direction for education agencies and providers and contributing to the Government's goals for education" (Ministry of Education, 2015d, p. 2), the key purpose of the Ministry of Education is to raise the educational achievement of every New Zealand child and as such they are in charge of policy development and support.

The Education Review Office "is an independent external evaluation agency" (Education Review Office, 2013, p. 5). Their main job is to review the effectiveness of early childhood settings and schools on a regular basis. The Education Review Office believes that external reviews compliment early childhood services self-review processes and encourage services to become increasingly capable of evaluating their own performance, ultimately however when ERO visit services they make the final judgement about the effectiveness of the service (Education Review Office, 2013a). The Education Review Office (2013a, p. 47) places services within four categories of;

- "Very well placed, the next ERO review in four years

- Well placed, the next ERO review in three years

- Requires further development, the next ERO review in two years

- Not well placed, the next ERO review in consultation with the Ministry of Education"

Key changes in early childhood education

Pathways to the future

Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki was a 10 year strategic plan, one of the aims of the plan was to ensure that all early childhood teachers were qualified and registered by 2012 (Ministry of Education, 2002). The current Government appear to have no such aspiration to ensure that all early childhood teachers are qualified and registered (Ministry of Education, 2015b) and current regulations require only 50% of early childhood teachers within teacher led services to hold a recognised qualification (New Zealand Government, 2008). The current Education Counts (2015a) statistics looking at the proportion of qualified teachers for the year 2014 report that of 3404 teacher led services;

- 1848 services had between 80-100% qualified teachers

- 1425 had between 50-79% qualified teachers

- 131 had less than 50% qualified teachers

These statistics show that the number of qualified teachers within teacher led services is variable and most services will have teaching staff that do not hold a recognised teachers qualification.

Beliefs and understandings underpinning early childhood education

Constructions of children and childhood produce and shape different approaches to curriculum (Mitchell, 2010). Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2007) suggest discussing explicit theories of childhood opens up spaces to engage in critical reflection about the nature, role and purposes of ECE. Much debate surrounding the quality of early childhood education and educational benefits continues to surround the sector (Alvestad & Duncan, 2006; Blaiklock, 2013a; Dahlberg et al., 2007; Early Childhood Taskforce, 2011; Education Review Office, 2007, 2013b, 2013c; McLachlan, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2015b; Moss, 2010; Nuttall, 2003, 2005; Smith, 2013a).

Following an earlier report by the Early Childhood Taskforce (Early Childhood Taskforce, 2011) in 2014, the Minister of Education appointed the Advisory Group on Early Learning to recommend improvements to implementing Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood curriculum framework, *Te Whāriki*, and support quality early years education (Ministry of Education, 2015c). A variety of differing constructions of childhood can be seen within ECE policy and curriculum documents such as, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). In a study investigating how the child was positioned within ECE policy Mitchell (2010, p. 333) proposes three dominant constructions of childhood; "dependant within the family", "learner within a community of learners" and as "citizen with a social community". Each of these constructions views and values children differently. Smith (2013b, p. 14) cautions "whether or not we are aware of the theories that underlie our actions, they are present", and these can have a profound effect on early childhood policy.

The current Ministry of Education rhetoric can be associated with the idea of the child as a dependent (Mitchell, 2010). The government has a strong focus on educational achievement, labour market outcomes and targeted support for child identified as 'high need' (May, 2014). Mitchell (2010, p. 333) states "support for families to participate in training and paid employment was conveyed as another desirable outcome of ECE". In this way ECE may be seen as a place where children can be cared for and educated, whilst their parents contribute to further developing their skills and the economy.

Alternatively *Te Whāriki* aspires for children to grow up as "competent and confident learners and communicators" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9). The curriculum positions children as competent active contributors, based on the sociocultural and ecological approaches which argue children gradually come to understand the world through their own interactions and communication with others (Smith, 2013b). Sociocultural and ecological perspectives see children within their "broader cultural and social settings" (Smith, 2013b, p. 28). When taking this position, children could be considered as being viewed "as a learner within a community of learners" and "as a citizen within a social community" (Mitchell, 2010, p. 338). Both constructions of childhood value children's learning and emphasis is placed on relationships with members of the learning community and children's rights (Mitchell, 2010; Smith, 2013b), which is consistent with core aspects of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Traditional views of children as passive recipients who are dependent on their family often underestimate children's role as competent and confident learners (Ministry of Education, 1996; Smith, 2013b). Viewing children from a competence and rights based position means "children are likely to develop agency if their everyday contexts provide a supportive framework, and a space for the expression of their voice" (Smith, 2013b, p. 38). Applying this in terms of assessment means emphasising the important role children play in assessing their own learning and actively contributing to decisions about where to next.

Political context

Consistent with the sociocultural nature of *Te Whāriki* assessment exemplars in the form of *Kei Tua o te Pae/Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* were first introduced in 2004, following extensive research (Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a). Accompanying the exemplars widespread access to Ministry of Education funded professional development took place (May, 2014; Mitchell, 2011; Smith, 2015). During this time the early childhood sector made "impressive positive shifts on every indicator of teaching and learning practice" (Smith, 2015, p. 86).

The political context has seen many shifts since this time and key moves to strengthen and enhance the quality of early childhood services, such as those proposed in *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (Ministry of Education, 2002) have been rescinded. Smith (2015, p. 92) believes that following the "National government taking power in 2008 amid a period of financial downturn, the fortunes of ECE are in a holding pattern and to some degree a decline". This may certainly be the case in relation to assessment practices as the level of professional development and support within the sector is minimal. Whilst teachers continue to have access to professional resources such as *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a) many early childhood teachers and settings missed out on the opportunity to participate in the supporting professional development.

Teachers' assessment practices are reported to be variable as teachers continue to negotiate what assessment means individually and collectively with the learning community (Education Review Office, 2007, 2013b; Mitchell, 2008). Shifts have occurred in government priorities and the current government is placing increasing emphasis on educational outcomes, particularly in relation to numeracy and literacy, with some fearing that increased focus on educational skills could undermine the gains made with regard to curriculum and assessment (May, 2014; Mitchell, 2011; Smith, 2015).

Two major reports to the government recommend an evaluation and re-engagement with *Te Whāriki* which if actioned is likely to further influence related assessment practices (Early Childhood Taskforce, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2015c). The Early Childhood Taskforce report fell largely on deaf ears with the government failing to action key recommendations to support quality improvement within the ECE sector (Smith, 2015). In the final stages of writing this thesis another report of the Advisory Group on Early Learning (Ministry of Education, 2015c) was released. Amongst the Advisory Group's recommendations were increased resources and professional development. The report suggests "the Ministry of Education call for tenders for a major professional development initiative (2016-2020 inclusive) focused on leadership for learning in early childhood education and care settings (birth to five years)" (Ministry of Education, 2015c, p. 6). Carr, Cowie, and Davis (2015) in a literature scan for the Ministry of Education have also made their position clear and called for "a reinstatement of professional development in assessment for all teachers and in all early childhood settings" (p. 54). The government is yet to take a position on the recommendations within the report. Early childhood education is potentially on the cusp of change in relation to curriculum and assessment.

My personal assessment journey

As a beginning teacher I became interested in assessing children's learning and planning to support learning. I went through initial teacher education at a time when the early childhood sector was just beginning to shift from summative forms of assessment, such as checklists and running records, to formative forms of assessment, in particular learning stories (Carr, 1998).

When I began my first teaching job I was surprised to see checklists were the main form of assessment still being used in the ECE sector at the time. Checklists were based on developmental norms and twice a year within the centre I worked, teachers completed a checklist for each child enrolled at the centre. After completing a checklist we would develop learning outcomes based on *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) to support children's achievement within areas they needed further support. The focus was on identifying what children could not yet do and supporting them to be able to achieve in these areas (Carr, 2001). It seemed to me that a checklist did not fit very well with *Te Whāriki*, a 'strength based' curriculum, and I became increasingly frustrated by ticking off children's skills. I had been introduced to the learning story framework as part of my studies and questioned why the

centre I was working in at the time was not using learning stories. However, as a beginning teacher, ultimately I continued to follow the centre practices at the time.

When the professional development courses began in 2005 to support the implementation of *Kei Tua o te Pae/Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2004) I was enthusiastic at the chance to take part. Although I was excited to begin using learning stories, I was challenged by the shift in assessment thinking presented by *Kei Tua o te Pae* and remember struggling with the complexities of how to assess children's learning using a 'strengths based' model. Often I found myself writing positive stories about children's learning experiences and identifying key learning. Nonetheless, when it came to the next steps for learning I seemed to fall back into a deficit view, focusing on what children could not yet do. Speaking with colleagues about this I discovered that I was not alone and other teachers were struggling to make the shift in thinking and practice. This was also highlighted in many studies at the time investigating assessment; for example, Davis (2006), Schurr (2009) and Turnock (2009) all discussed some of the ways teachers struggled to make the shift. Similar to my experiences, Turnock (2009) found that teachers in her study were noticing and recognising children's strengths, interests and abilities, but when it came to planning future learning pathways often teachers focused on the deficit. This intrigued me and I began to wonder why I and so many of my colleagues were struggling to shift our assessment practice. Over time I have considered this further and began to ask; what are some of the issues and tensions teachers were grappling with in terms of assessment?

As indicated earlier in this chapter, formative assessment for learning within early childhood is still relatively new, and changes and developments to challenge my thinking are happening all the time. After working with the learning story framework as a teacher, centre manager and now supporting beginning teachers I still have questions. Even though I have participated in the professional development programmes supporting *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a) which certainly supported my understanding, I still feel uneasy about my knowledge. I feel my knowledge and understanding of assessment is constantly on the move, as I explore assessment and read about others perspectives.

Although I am no longer in a teaching position, as a part time lecturer at an initial teacher education provider I continue to ponder the ways in which teachers are using assessment to support their work with children and families. Teachers develop ways to assess

children's learning based on what works for them and their setting. Although there are basic guidelines set out within the regulatory framework (Ministry of Education, 2008; New Zealand Government, 2008) each teacher I talk with and ECE setting I visit assesses and documents children's learning and development differently. Some teachers follow a format which may have been passed down from management, and have quite clear parameters around what should be included in a learning story. Whereas other teachers are more individualised in their story writing and formatting, and one story may look quite different to the next. These variations in assessment mean that every setting can negotiate with the learning community what meaningful assessment looks like for the individual setting.

This chapter has charted the key areas to consider when investigating assessment within early childhood contexts. Assessment is complex and each teacher and setting has a differing understanding of assessment which influences practice. Early childhood education is the youngest area of education within Aotearoa New Zealand and has developed quickly. Although we have been working with *Te Whāriki* since 1996 the curriculum and indeed assessment methods aligning with the curriculum are relatively new. Teachers continue to work out meaningful ways to assess children's learning using formative assessment methods, in particular learning stories. Early childhood policy and government priorities at the time have the potential to support or constrain developments within the sector. Given the current political context and recent Advisory Group report change is potentially again on the horizon. The next chapter continues to investigate assessment policy and key ideas which influence assessment understandings and practices.

Chapter 2 – Literature review

The purpose of the literature review is to give an overview of key ideas which guide and influence assessment within Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood settings. This provides grounding for the study and sets out some of the issues and tensions teachers may be facing as they attempt to understand and use assessment effectively within their daily practice. This chapter outlines some of the key ideas and literature in relation to assessment within early childhood contexts. It begins with an overview of key theoretical perspectives relating to assessment drawing on national and some international literature. The landscape of early childhood education within Aotearoa New Zealand is relatively unique and *Te Whāriki* supports and guides assessment practices. Learning stories and formative assessment will be discussed as well as learning dispositions. The chapter concludes with a discussion of issues of assessment validity, credibility and trustworthiness.

Theoretical understanding of early childhood assessment

Assessment practice is largely based on teachers' understanding of how children learn, and often although teachers claim to align themselves to particular theoretical perspectives what actually happens in practice can differ from teachers' said beliefs. Traditionally within education, developmental perspectives, where children develop in a stage-like fashion have dominated educational theory and practice (Matusov, DePalma, & Drye, 2007). As developmental perspectives have dominated teacher education programmes, until more recent times, it can understandably be challenging for teachers to shift their practice and work within newer more contemporary perspectives (Hill, 2011). Fleer (2010) believes how teachers conceptualise childhood influences what they expect in relation to children's learning and indeed assessment. If teachers completed their teacher education when there was a strong focus on developmental perspectives they may be heavily influenced by these perspectives within practice.

Developmental perspectives based largely on the work of Piaget have a long history in education (Hill, 2011). Agbenyega (2009, p. 31) suggests "Piaget's key contribution to the field of child development is his notion that all children pass through a fixed sequence, through a series of universal stages of cognitive development". Within a developmental framework children are looked at as individuals and measured against the 'norm' (Fleer, 2010). Thinking in this way positions children as either fitting within or outside the norm.

Children who do not fit within the inherently Western view of 'normal' universal development are therefore positioned as having some sort of deficit (Fleer, 2010). Viewing child development as individualistic can also mean that children are not viewed within the context of their relationships with others.

Contrary to developmental perspectives, sociocultural theory which is often credited to Vygotsky, emphasises that children grow and learn within the context of the world around them and interactions with other children and adults are important in developing an understanding of the world (Hill, 2011). Sociocultural theory suggests that children learn and develop within differing social environments and "children exist in a context located within the wider society" (Agbenyega, 2009, p. 34). This is in contrast to the notion of universal development as each context and society is different. Developmental theory positions children as vulnerable if they do not fit within behaviour 'norms' whereas sociocultural perspectives position children as "competent individuals who are developing in relation to their cultural contexts in time and space" (Agbenyega, 2009, p. 36). This is similar to *Te Whāriki* aspirations "for children to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9).

Curriculum documents provide the intended curriculum and how teachers translate this into practice requires an understanding of key theoretical perspectives inherent within *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). Teachers are required to bridge the gap between theoretical perspectives reflected in key documents such as *Te Whāriki* and *Kei Tua o te Pae* and what they actually do in practice to make assessment work within their settings on a daily basis (Alvestad et al., 2009; Ministry of Education, 1996, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a). Edwards (2007, p. 84) believes that the "translation of sociocultural theory into practice has been hampered by the historical commitment the field holds to cognitive-developmentalism", and this is hard to shake especially when other areas of education and the health system draw heavily on a deficit model.

Taking a developmental perspective of assessment means there is a tendency to focus on what children cannot yet do. Developmental views of assessment say "either 'we'll find the missing pieces' or 'don't worry, the missing pieces will turn up in their own time'" (Carr, 2001, p. 11). Competencies are ticked off and areas in which the child is yet to develop become important. Whereas a sociocultural perspective highlights what children can do within their social and cultural contexts, both within and outside the early childhood setting.

Sociocultural perspectives position children as competent members of a cultural community, recognising children as active constructors of knowledge "not as deficit players with deviations that need to be fixed" (Agbenyega, 2009, p. 36) . Moving from a developmental to sociocultural view of assessment means moving away from 'filling the gaps' and viewing children as competent members of the learning community who actively construct knowledge within daily interactions with others. However, this could be a major shift in thinking and assessment practice for some teachers as developmental theory is seemingly entrenched within education. According to Bruner (1996) the shift requires moving beyond the developmental notions of child development which have become deep seated 'folk psychologies'.

Early childhood curriculum

Cowie (2009) describes "the dynamic interaction that exists between assessment, curriculum, teaching and learning" (p. 48). The curriculum can guide what teachers assess, and what teachers choose to pay attention to within assessment influences teaching and learning. Assessment practices are connected to the prescribed curriculum at the time and the current early childhood curriculum is *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). *Te Whāriki* was developed in the early nineties by Helen May and Margaret Carr in conjunction with Tamati and Tilly Reedy, and included extensive consultation with the early childhood community (Smith, 2015). *Te Whāriki* was ground breaking in many ways (Ministry of Education, 1996). To name a few it was the first bi-cultural curriculum document within Aotearoa New Zealand and was unique at the time for the holistic approach taken (Smith, 2015). The curriculum outlines key principles and strands rather than focusing on more traditional developmental domains. This holistic approach to children's learning focuses on developing children's dispositions to learn and working theories, rather than specific sets of skills and knowledge (Smith, 2015). Assessing children's learning in action and including the perspectives of a range of participants became an important aspect of assessing in line with *Te Whāriki.*

Assessment context within Aotearoa New Zealand

The early childhood education sector within Aotearoa New Zealand does not have a prescribed method of assessment. The *Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations* (New Zealand Government, 2008) outlines the minimum standards teacher led early childhood services must adhere to. In relation to assessment planning and implementation, 43

Curriculum Standard general, requires every licensed service provider to whom the regulation applies to:

> (a) plan, implement, and evaluate a curriculum that is designed to enhance children's learning and development through the provision of learning experiences and that is consistent with any curriculum framework prescribed by the Minister that applies to the service.

The above curriculum standard makes no mention of assessment, however to plan and implement a curriculum which enhances children's learning assessment of children's learning is implied. It could also be argued that as the current prescribed curriculum framework is the principle and strands of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), and the standard requires the curriculum to be consistent with current, research, theory and practices that the learning story framework fits both of these criteria. Collaborating with parents, family and whānau is also a key aspect of the learning story framework.

The Licensing Criteria for Early Childhood Education and Care Centres, which is used to assess how ECE services meet the required minimum standard provides the following definition relating to assessment (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 2):

> *[A]ssessment* means the process of *noticing* children's learning, *recognising* its significance, and *responding* in ways that foster further learning. It includes documenting some, but not necessarily all, of what and how children are learning *in order to inform teaching, and make learning visible.*

Without explicitly using the term learning story, the above definition points to the use of learning stories and the progressive filters of notice, recognise and respond to support teaching and learning within early childhood settings (Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a). Although the regulations relating to assessment within Aotearoa New Zealand ECE settings are left relatively open to interpretation it is fairly clear within this quote that everything points to learning stories.

Kei Tua o te Pae (Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a) encourages teachers to negotiate with the learning community assessment practices which highlight learning relevant

to the particular setting. Early childhood settings, according *to Kei Tua o te Pae*, are to develop their own meaningful assessments based on the priorities of the learning community.

> The books are designed as a professional development resource to enable learning communities to discuss assessment issues in general, both in terms of Te Whāriki and in terms of their own specific settings. They introduce principles that will help learning communities develop their own assessments of children's learning.
>
> (Ministry of Education, 2004a, p. 2)

Kei Tua o te Pae is also very clear in stating that "[no] one format is "right"" (Ministry of Education, 2004a, p. 19) for assessing children's learning. However, early childhood policy and documents imply there are key ingredients to 'quality' assessments (Education Review Office, 2007, 2013b, 2013c; Ministry of Education, 1996, 2004f, 2007b, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; New Zealand Government, 2008). The Education Review Office also suggests good quality assessment should follow the framework indicated in Kei *Tua o te Pae* which;

> "emphasises socio-cultural assessment practices that embody the four principles of Te Whāriki:
>
> - family and community: assessment should involve families, whānau and the community;
> - empowerment: assessment of children's learning should enhance their sense of themselves as capable people and competent learners;
> - relationships: assessment is influenced by the relationships between educators and children, and these relationships should be taken into account during assessment; and
> - holistic development: assessment of children should take place in the same context as activities and relationships, and should encompass all dimensions of children's learning and development and see the child as a whole".
>
> (Education Review Office, 2007, p. 4)

Another example from ERO (2013b, p. 15) highlights that "effective assessment practices include:

- Valuing children's social and cultural backgrounds

- Linking assessment to children's goals and next steps

- Using children's and parents' first languages where appropriate

- Using assessment to guide planning and the curriculum

- Recognising and incorporating parents' aspirations and perspectives".

Ministry of Education support documents and Education Review Office reports implicitly or explicitly at times point to learning stories as the current preferred method of assessment (Carr et al., 2015; Education Review Office, 2013b, 2013c, 2015a; Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a). The Education Review Office (2007) *Quality of Assessment in Early Childhood Education* national report explicitly stated that "the Ministry of Education is currently supporting the implementation of the early childhood assessment exemplars, *Kei Tua o te Pae*" (p. 1). Within the most recent Education Review Office (2015a, p. 14) national report focusing on continuity of learning within and between early childhood and school settings, it is stated supportive assessment in ECE focused on;

"children's strengths, dispositions and interests were the focus of assessment. Their learning, it's increasing complexity over time and next steps were identified and recorded. Assessment information informed planning and identified children's next learning steps".

This implicitly implies that learning stories remain the preferred form of assessment within early childhood settings. Carr et al. (2015) scan of literature for the Ministry of Education, is however explicit in discussing the role of narrative assessments and *Kei Tua o te Pae* within early childhood settings. The Ministry of Education and Education Review Office continue to in one way or another point to narrative, formative forms of assessment, in particular learning stories, as discussed within *Kei Tua o te Pae*, as the preferred form of assessment within ECE (Carr et al., 2015; Education Review Office, 2007, 2013b, 2013c, 2015a; Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a).

Learning stories

Within their proposal to create the curriculum Helen May and Margaret Carr had identified the need in future for guidelines on assessment to be created (Te One, 2003). In 1995 Carr led the Ministry of Education funded project for assessing children's experiences in early childhood settings. However, it was not until 2002 that Carr and Wendy Lee were contracted

by the Ministry of Education to complete a major project on assessment (Carr et al., 2015). This resulted in the publication of 20 booklets focusing on assessment for learning within a Aotearoa New Zealand ECE context; *Kei Tua o te Pae/Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2004c) and professional development to support the implementation of the exemplars which followed. As an extension of *Kei Tua o te Pae*, to offer a kaupapa Māori perspective *Te Whātu Pōkeka* was also published in 2009 (Ministry of Education, 2009b). These exemplars highlight a range of ways teachers within ECE settings can and are using narrative assessments, generally in the form of learning stories, to support children's learning and inform teaching.

The learning story framework, originating from the work of Carr, provides a framework for assessment consistent with the principles, strands and sociocultural nature of *Te Whāriki* (Carr, 2001; Keesing-Styles & Hedges, 2007). Learning stories are structured written narratives of significant learning moments, highlighting children's strengths, interests, abilities and dispositions (Cowie & Carr, 2004; Dunn, 2004). These credit based assessments assess children in the context of everyday experiences paying attention to learning dispositions and ideally involve multiple perspectives (Carr, 2001). A key aim of learning stories is to show children as confident, competent learners and reflect reciprocal, responsive relationships which happen on a daily basis in a range of contexts (Cowie & Carr, 2004). Collaborating with the learning community (children, parents, families/whānau, and other teachers) is valued and learning stories aim to include multiple perspectives (Feltham, 2005). As the learning community discusses and makes decisions about children's learning teachers give attention to and aim to highlight key learning dispositions (Carr, 2001).

Unlike more traditional forms of assessment the learning story framework views teachers as active participants. Learning stories are often written in the first person, placing the teachers within the story, which helps to recognise and acknowledge teachers views (Feltham, 2005). Writing stories in the first person means teachers' understandings and interactions between children and teachers become central to assessments. This was an important shift as teachers were no longer seen as standing outside the learning process imparting knowledge (Hill, 2011), rather children and teachers were viewed as constructing knowledge together (Carr, 2001). Learning stories written by a teacher who knows the child well became used as a catalyst for discussions about learning with other members of the learning community - children, parents, family/whānau and other teachers (Carr, 2001)

Formative assessment practices within Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood settings

The main form of assessment now being used in early childhood education, learning stories are considered a formative form of assessment. Formative assessment, often referred to as 'assessment for learning', assesses children within the context of their everyday learning experiences and understandings gained are used as a basis for future teaching and learning (Broadfoot, 2007; Hargreaves, 2007). Broadfoot (2007) states "formative assessment has to be planned as an integral part of teaching and is orientated to supporting progression in learning….It is a process used by teachers and students to recognize and respond to learning in order to enhance it and identify next steps" (p. 111). Black and Wiliam (1998) focusing on formative assessment in school settings believe 'assessment' involves all the activities teachers and children engage in that provide useful information that can be used as feedback to improve teaching and learning. This means that assessment is seen as part of the teaching and learning process rather than something that happens after or outside teaching and learning experiences.

The above definitions look at formative assessment as a process, however the term formative assessment is now often being used to describe particular assessment tools, for example learning stories (Wiliam, 2011). Wiliam (2011, p. 38) cautions that the "difficulty with trying to make the term formative assessment apply to a thing (the assessment itself) is that it just does not work". Black and Wiliam (1998, p. 39) suggest that "the terms formative and summative make much more sense as descriptors of the function that assessment data serve, rather than of the assessments themselves". Bennett (2011, p. 6) also believes "assessment is not a test but a process". These definitions argue that it is about using information gained through assessment to make changes to teaching and support children's learning more effectively that makes it formative, rather than the assessment tool itself. The Ministry of Education (2011, p. 18) definition of formative assessment in school settings aligns with this:

"If assessment is to be truly formative, it is important to follow through on what is learned during the inquiry with adjustments that *transform* practice and improve learning".

If applying this definition to early childhood contexts, it could also be suggested that formative assessment requires teachers to use what has been learnt about children to

transform practice and improve children's learning on a daily basis. Formative assessment in this sense is not just about documenting children's learning progress, but almost more importantly, about using this information to inform future potential learning. It is not so much about the assessment of learning rather, assessment for future learning which is valuable.

Wiliam (2011, p. 45) suggests "any assessment can be formative and that assessment functions formatively when it improves the instructional decisions that are made by teachers, learners, or their peers" (p. 45).   Wiliam (2011, p. 40) also believes "good processes require good instruments, and instruments are useless unless they are used intelligently". This highlights that teachers understanding of formative forms of assessment should be used to guide the assessment of children's learning in an intelligent manner. As previously mentioned, the concept of formative assessment is still relatively new within early childhood contexts and although resources such as *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a) highlight narrative and formative assessment, some suggest that teachers current knowledge of formative assessment is not enough to effectively use formative forms of assessment (Blaiklock, 2008)

In summary prior to the wide spread use of learning stories the ECE sector had used summative forms of assessment often in the form of checklists, which focused on identifying gaps in children's learning and development. Based on identified deficits teaching strategies were developed aiming to fill the gaps in children's knowledge and learning (Carr, 2001). Podmore and Carr (1999, December) believed that the sociocultural nature of *Te Whāriki* meant that these assessment practices needed to change to align with the principles and strands outlined in the curriculum. This change came in the form of learning stories which are considered to be a formative assessment tool which teachers, in conjunction with children, parents, families/whānau are encouraged to use to support and extend children's learning

Critiques of learning stories

Although many authors have praised the learning story framework (Dunn, 2004; Feltham, 2005; Hatherly & Sands, 2002; Mitchell, 2008; Nyland & Alfayez, 2012; Reisman, 2011), not all are convinced about the effectiveness of learning stories. Nuttall, Blaiklock and more recently Zhang in particular voice concerns about the assessment framework and the challenges involved with assessment of learning dispositions (Anthony, McLachlan, & Lim Fock Poh, 2015; Blaiklock, 2008, 2010, 2013b; Nuttall, 2005, 2013; Zhang, 2015).

Blaiklock (2010) suggests there are several key 'problems' with learning stories and considers validity and credibility to be major issues with the learning story framework. Blaiklock (2010) sees this as a problem due to the lack of guidance on what learning areas to assess. Problems showing change over time and the use of one experience within assessment, which is then used as a basis for future learning experiences is also seen as a key flaw in the learning story framework (Blaiklock, 2008, 2010, 2013b). Blaiklock questions the worth of using learning stories as the main assessment method in settings due to lack of knowledge and guidance around assessment and what to assess.

The Meade report which was completed after the introduction of *Kei Tua o te Pae* suggested that Carr (2001) had proposed "learning stories as narratives of learning where learning progression becomes obvious, but in reality many staff wrote simple anecdotes" (p. 41). This potentially highlighted a lack of in depth understanding about the learning story framework at the time and Perkins (2013) suggests this may still be the case. Perkins (2013) believes one of the problems with learning stories is teachers' lack of understanding about what to and how to assess children's learning. Contributing to this is teachers' lack of time to share and discuss learning stories with others. In some settings unqualified teachers complete learning stories and Perkins (2013) proposes these teachers are less likely to be able to analyse stories using *Te Whāriki* and/or learning theories. Perkins (2013) also believes that the main support documents, *Kei Tua o te Pae*, do not provide enough clear guidance for teachers to effectively make sense of the learning story framework and that through omitting other frameworks and ideas *Kei Tua o te Pae* is privileging some information and making learning stories a norm discourse in ECE.

There are many other ways to assess children's learning and key to the critiques of the learning story framework is the lack of focus on subject/content knowledge. Blaiklock (2013) suggests learning stories are of limited value to show what children are actually learning in ECE. There is increasing concern that learning stories downplay traditional content knowledge (Anthony, McLachlan, Fuk Poh, 2015). Blaiklock (2008) goes as far as stating that "currently the theory and empirical evidence on learning dispositions is not sufficient to support the continued use of Learning Stories as a major assessment technique in early childhood settings" (pp. 85-86). A sentiment supported by Zhang (2015) who contents "that the learning story approach has been so thoroughly promoted as the best assessment practice in New Zealand that it has become unusually difficult for those in the early childhood sector to stop, think, and allow for any kind of adaptation to the approach" (p. 72). Nuttall (2013)

suggests that the introduction of the learning story framework and *Kei Tua o te Pae* have been very influential within early childhood education. Whilst Nuttall (2013) sees value in the use of learning stories and she proposes that there is still work to be done to develop teachers understanding and enactment of formative assessment practices. According to Nuttall (2013) despite the increased attention on learning dispositions, which are a key aspect of learning stories, they remain difficult to understand within and outside the education sector.

> *Learning dispositions*
>
> "Dispositions have emerged as central in the debate about what is of lasting value in learning…They dispose learners to interpret, edit and respond to learning opportunities in characteristic ways" (Dunphy, 2010, p. 45).

The idea of learning dispositions is originally from the field of psychology, where a disposition was believed as belonging to the individual (Carr, 2001). However, other definitions of dispositions describe them in a wider sense as "a process of overt and covert decision-making about a course of action" (Carr et al., 2010, p. 15). Gresalfi (2009, p. 329) talks about learning dispositions as "ways of being in the world that involve ideas about, perspectives on, and engagement with information that can be seen both in moments of interaction and in more enduring patterns over time". This is similar to how *Kei Tua o te Pae* describes learning dispositions as a combination of "knowledge, skills and attitudes which combine as dispositions – habits of mind or patterns of learning" (Ministry of Education, 2004a, p. 18).

Learning dispositions became increasingly discussed and debated within the ECE sector with the introduction of the learning story framework, which asked for teachers to consider children's strengths, interests, abilities and highlight learning dispositions. The work of Carr (2001) guided much of ECE teachers' thinking about learning dispositions and she defines dispositions as "situated learning strategies plus motivation…being ready, willing and able to participate in various ways: a combination of inclination, sensitivity to occasion, and the relevant skill and knowledge" (p. 21). Carr's work on dispositions is based on the work of others, in particular Lilian Katz, who views learning dispositions as "habits of mind, tendencies to respond to situations in certain ways" (Katz, 1998, as cited in Carr, 2001, p. 21). Learning dispositions do not just focus on the acquisition of knowledge, focus is also

placed on the responsive, reciprocal relationships between the learner and the environment (Carr, 2001; Podmore & Carr, 1999, December).

Although there are a wide range of learning dispositions (Katz, 1993) five key learning dispositions have been connected to the strands of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). Carr (1998) proposed the following learning dispositions and connections to the strands of *Te Whāriki*:

- Courage and curiosity, which is characterised by children taking an interest – Belonging
- Trust and playfulness, evidenced by children being involved – Well-being
- Perseverance, shown through children persisting with challenge and/or uncertainty – Exploration
- Confidence, where children express a point of view or feeling – Communication
- Responsibility, which is seen as children take responsibility within the programme – Contribution

    (Carr, 2001; Carr, May, & Podmore, 2002; Podmore & Carr, 1999, December)

Although highlighting learning dispositions is encouraged within the learning story framework there is debate about dispositional learning. Sadler (2007) suggests there are dangers in "implying that dispositions can be assessed in some generalised way" (p. 46). Sadler (2007) believes that too much of a focus on learning dispositions and the process of learning means not enough emphasis is placed on the product and learning areas. Other authors have also expressed concerns that prioritising learning dispositions has meant that learning areas and subject knowledge can become a neglected area of the curriculum (Anthony et al., 2015; Blaiklock, 2013a; McLachlan & Arrow, 2011; Nuttall, 2005).

Validity, credibility and trustworthy assessments

The narrative nature of learning stories means that stories are interpretative; every reader will read the story differently, depending on their own views, and social and cultural understandings (Carr, 2001). This is a strength of the learning story framework, however it poses a number of questions in relation to rigour, which Carr (2001) suggests can be addressed by judgements of "plausibility and trustability" (p. 183).

Learning stories are generally written by one teacher on significant learning events which happen over time, which means that learning stories are subjective. As each teacher views learning differently and foregrounds different strengths, interests, abilities and dispositions, there is likely to be great variation in the significant learning moments which are recorded (Blaiklock, 2008). What teachers decide to record in assessments varies from teacher to teacher and for a learning story to be trustworthy the reader needs to trust the teacher and judgements which have been made in the assessment.

Broadfoot (2007) discusses how formative assessment should be planned as an integral part of the teaching process and "using assessment to support learning, rather than to simply judge it, may be the most powerful tool we have to improve educational outcomes" (p. 130). This notion is supported by Hargreaves (2007) who believes formative assessment should be used "specially to enhance learning processes or performances, rather than just measure them" (p. 186). This implies that teachers need to ensure learning stories not only record significant moments and events, but that the understandings gained during the assessment process are put to good use and guide future learning experiences. Hargreaves (2007) thoughts on consequential validity, where the validity of assessment for learning depends on "how far the interpretations and use of the assessment leads to further learning" (p. 186) could be argued to apply here. Therefore for learning stories to be trustworthy they need to be more than just another task on teachers 'to do' list, and be used to inform teaching and learning now and in the future, and this teaching and learning should be consistent with the social values and practices of the particular setting (Hargreaves, 2007).

Hatherly and Sands (2002) suggested there is "growing interest in and credibility given to narrative forms of documentation" (p. 9). As narrative assessments are less structured and formal than traditional forms of assessment they are complex and challenge traditional notions of validity. Traditional forms of observations aim to uncover 'truth', whereas narratives acknowledge multiple interpretations of learning moments (Carr, 2009). In one of her earlier writings about learning stories Carr (2001) discussed validity as learning stories being trustworthy and transparent. Validity Carr (2001) believes requires "interpreted observations, discussions and agreements…calling on interpretive and qualitative methods for researching complex learning in a real-life early childhood setting" (p. 13).

 Much like qualitative research methods assessments will include multiple voices, including the child's, and thick description is sought (Carr, 2001). The trustworthiness of

learning stories can be achieved by "keeping the data transparent, ensuring that a range of interpreters have their say, refining the constructs as they appear locally, and being clear about the connection between the learner and the environment" (Carr, 2001, p. 183). Keeping the data transparent means ensuring other teachers, parents and families and indeed children can understand the learning story, "and find alternative readings if they want" (Carr, 2001, p. 183). One way teachers can help to ensure a range of interpreters have a say is by ensuring assessments are reader friendly and can be easily understood by members of the learning community.

Learning community

Involving all members of the learning community is an important aspect of the learning story framework. Cowie and Carr (2004, p. 95) describe a community of learners as "teachers: children, families and staff team". Assessments that include the perspectives of the learning community enrich learning and support teachers' knowledge and understanding of children's strengths, interests and abilities in a variety of contexts. Learning stories aim to include the perspectives of children, parents, families/whānau and other teachers (Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a).

Black and Wiliam (1998, p. 10) state that self-assessment by children "far from being a luxury, is in fact an essential component of formative assessment". Broström (2006) also believes that including the perspectives of children is an important part of all aspects of planning and implementation. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 29) highlights that "children are increasingly able to assess their own learning, to outline goals and to decide how to achieve these goals". This sentiment is echoed in *Kei Tua o te Pae* and book four, which in particular, details some of the ways children can contribute to their own assessment, suggesting the following two main reasons to provide opportunities for children to contribute to their own assessments (Ministry of Education, 2004d, p. 2);

- "settings that encourage children to set and assess their own goals are rich sites for learning"
- "seeking children's perspectives about their learning is about viewing children as social actors with opinions and views of their own"

Involving families in children's education has many benefits for children's learning and this extends to involving families in assessment (Buldu, 2010; Cohen, 2006; Folque & Siraj-Blatchford, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a). Cowie and Carr (2004, p.

104) believe parents "contribute to an accumulation of evidence of rich and intertwined individual and collective learning" (p. 104). The Education Review Office (2015a, p. 4) has stated that "parents and whānau play an important role in their child's ongoing learning". The important role of family is highlighted in *Te Whāriki*, particularly within the family and community principle (Ministry of Education, 1996). *Kei Tua o te Pae* builds on this when book two "insists that families should be part of the assessment and evaluation of the curriculum as well as children's learning and development" (Ministry of Education, 2004b, p. 30). Interestingly a recent report on the continuity of learning in the early years found that teachers and parents "placed a high value on informal assessments and informal conversations that took place in the learning environment" (Mitchell et al., 2015b, p. 1). This highlights that the informal daily conversations about children's learning were just as important, if not more important than formal documented assessments.

A common way teachers initially began to incorporate the perspectives of children and families, within early learning stories, was through a separate section within the learning story often called a 'child's voice' and 'parent's voice' (Carr, 2001). Although the ways teachers are incorporating the child and parent's voice has changed over the years value continues to be placed on including multiple perspectives. Many teachers and settings are now using a range of strategies to include children and parents' perspectives, some of which include: emailing completed stories home to parents or using e-portfolio systems, inviting children to take photos and narrate stories to teachers, digitally recording children's experiences, talking with parents about children's experiences and including details of conversations within stories, as well as asking parents to write learning stories relating to children's experience outside the ECE setting (Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a).

Working collaboratively as a teaching team and including a range of teachers' perspectives within assessment is also important. Teachers are very much a part of narrative assessment practices, and teachers' perspectives, ideas and reflective comments enrich documented assessments (Carr & Lee, 2012). Time to engage in professional discussions about children's learning and assessment is an important feature of well-developed assessment practices. Mitchell et al. (2015b, p. 28) found that "discussion of learning information played a role in teachers/educators recognising learning and learning progress and deciding what steps to take next to support learning".

Supporting and encouraging all members of the learning community to take part and have their say in relation to children's learning helps to enrich assessment. Black and Wiliam (2009) believe formative forms of assessment must involve partnerships between the teacher, learner and peers. Although teachers are providing the learning environment, learning they believe is a joint responsibility (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Hatherly and Sands (2002, p. 10) also believe "as meaning making is central to our interest in assessment, then objectivity becomes more authentic when a variety of perspectives are canvassed and documented".

This chapter has outlined some of the key aspects of early childhood curriculum and assessment practices within Aotearoa New Zealand. Learning stories as a form of formative assessment have been investigated. Whilst a number of authors have heralded the strengths of the learning story framework not all agree that learning stories are an effective way to assess children's learning within an early childhood setting. The validity and trustworthiness of learning stories and indeed learning dispositions has been called into question with some authors suggesting there is little evidence to support the continued use of learning stories as the main form of assessment. Little is known about the practical ways teachers are making assessment work within everyday practice and teachers' assessment meanings and much of the research so far has suggested practices are variable. This research aims to take a close look at teachers' assessment understandings and practice asking the questions: How are teachers assessing children's learning in early childhood settings? How do teachers make sense of learning assessments? What are early childhood teachers' understandings of learning assessments?

In the next chapter, I discuss research methodology. An overview of qualitative research will be provided and the theoretical framework of social constructionism will be introduced. The chapter will also discuss research design, data gathering strategies concluding with ideas regarding credibility and limitations of the study.

Chapter 3 - Research methodology

In this study my aim was to explore the ways early childhood teachers develop and enact their understandings of the meanings of assessment. Given this aim, qualitative research was the most appropriate approach. In this chapter I will provide an overview of key aspects of qualitative research and ethnography guiding the study. An overview of social constructionism discusses how this theoretical approach was used to guide the study. The study was undertaken in one early childhood setting using multiple methods of data collection to help develop an in-depth understanding of assessment within the setting. Data collection methods included observations, field notes, document analysis and interviews. Data was analysed using inductive thinking with each piece of data being used as a source to develop understanding. The chapter concludes with discussion regarding the credibility of the research, limitations of the research and notions of reciprocity.

This study was guided by the following research questions: How are teachers assessing children's learning in early childhood settings? How do teachers make sense of learning assessments? What are early childhood teachers' understandings of learning assessments?

Research design

In this section I describe the research design. The section opens with a discussion of qualitative research and ethnography. A brief description of the setting and participants is also provided.

Qualitative research

Qualitative approaches to research, such as ethnography, aim to describe "peoples 'lived experiences' which occur within a particular historical and social context" (Snape & Spencer, 2003, p. 7). A key characteristic of qualitative research is that it involves thick, rich description often taking a narrative form (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Mutch, 2009; Snape & Spencer, 2003). "Meaning is of essential concern to the qualitative approach" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 7) and this research aimed to develop an understanding of the meanings teachers attach to assessment within their setting from teachers' perspectives (Snape & Spencer, 2003).

Qualitative research is naturalistic, meaning that data is collected in actual, everyday settings and the researcher is the key instrument (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Snape & Spencer,

2003). By spending time within one early childhood setting getting to know participants and gathering data I was trying to gain a "holistic understanding of research participants' views and actions" in relation to assessment (Snape & Spencer, 2003, p. 7).

Ethnography

As this study attempted to describe an aspect of early childhood culture in one setting; ethnography was drawn on "where the researcher goes 'into the field' to study a group or community in its natural setting" (Davidson & Tolich, 2003, p. 275). Ethnography was utilised as the main objectives were to understand the meanings and activities of early childhood teachers through spending time involved in one early childhood setting (Brewer, 2000). I spent extended periods of time over a seven month period in the setting becoming immersed in assessment practices within the setting, but not attempting to change them (Hatch, 2007).

Mills and Morton (2013) talk about ethnography as being, seeing, writing and that ethnographic researchers do not switch off when they leave the research site. Ethnography is almost a disposition. I spent time in the setting seeking to understand and describe aspects of culture from an insider's perspective (Hatch, 2007). Teachers' assessment understandings and practices were on my mind constantly throughout the research process, and I found even when I was completing other life tasks my mind often wandered to research moments. I kept a research diary close by before, during and after the data collection period to record thoughts.

Theoretical perspective

One of my aims was to find out the ways in which teachers in this setting translate assessment understandings into practices (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Social and cultural contexts were important to me throughout the research as I aimed to develop a greater understanding of teachers' lived assessment realities, recognising that there are multiple realities (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Mutch, 2009). Teachers were the experts about their experiences with assessment in this setting and I observed and listened carefully to teachers to develop a greater understanding of their assessment experiences. I asked open ended questions aimed at finding out more about teachers' understandings and use of assessment.

Social constructionism

At the core of social constructionism is the belief that knowledge is constructed through interaction and social processes (Burr, 1995, Lock & Strong, 2010). Knowledge is seen not as something people have or do not have but rather as something people do together, knowledge exists between people (Burr, 1995; Lock & Strong, 2010; Moss, Dillon, & Statham, 2000). Language helps make it possible for people to construct knowledge (Burr, 1995).

Although social constructionist perspectives share commonalities there is not one clear definition for the position. Burr (1995) discusses more of a family resemblance, with differing definitions sharing commonalities. This is similar to Lock and Strong (2010) who state there is "no one school of social constructionism. Rather, it is a broad church" (p. 6). The majority of literature does however all highlight the importance of a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge, historical and cultural specificity, the importance of language and that knowledge and social action go together (Burr, 1995; Dahlberg et al., 2007; Hill, 2009; Lock & Strong, 2010; Moss et al., 2000; Murphy, 2013).

Burr (1995) believes "social constructionism involves challenging most of our common sense knowledge of ourselves and the world we live in" (p. 17). Social constructionism asks us to question and be suspicious of our assumptions, and be aware of alternative ways of knowing (Burr, 1996). Rather than believing in universal knowledge waiting to be discovered, social constructionism values multiple perspectives, constructed between people within particular social contexts (Moss et al., 2000). Knowledge and understandings are therefore historically and culturally specific to particular times and spaces (Burr, 1995).

Together people create knowledge, rather than discover it (Burr, 1995). Reality and meanings are established through social processes in the course of everyday social interactions. Lock and Strong (2010, p. 7) believe "people are self-defining and socially constructed participants in their shared lives". People are therefore actively creating rather than producing knowledge, and there are many alternative constructions of knowledge. Active interactions with other people in society produce and sustain knowledge (Burr, 1995, Moss et al., 2010).

Language is an important aspect of knowledge and social action as people contest meanings. Burr (1995) believes "it is the insistence upon the nature of language as constantly changing and varied in its meanings that is the keystone of social constructionism" (p. 32).

Language and thought are seen to be inseparable with language providing the basis for all thought (Burr, 1995). Language is important, as it helps to find a way to express ourselves to others, through talking and writing, "language therefore is a necessary pre-condition of thought as we know it" (Burr, 1995, p. 7). Moss et al., (2000, p. 235) believe "the language we use shapes and directs our way of looking at and understanding the world". The ways we express ourselves and the language we use is culturally bound (Burr, 1995) and our experiences could always be constructed differently. The way we behave and the things we say differ depending on whom we are with, what we are doing and why (Lock & Strong, 2010) and meanings of words differ greatly depending on the context, and not everyone agrees. Burr (1995, p. 39) sums this up stating "meanings carried by language are never fixed, always open to question, always contestable, always temporary". Lock and Strong (2010, p. 7) take this further believing that the meaning of language is "inherently embedded in socio-cultural processes…specific to particular times and places".

Also central to social constructionism is the notion of discourse. The things people say and write down can be thought of as occasions where particular discourses are given the opportunity to construct an event in one way rather than another (Burr, 1995, Moss et al., 2000). Burr (1995) discusses discourse as "doing, talking, writing" (p. 47) noting it is more than just actions, suggesting discourse can be thought of as a "frame of reference, a conceptual backcloth against which our utterances can be interpreted" (p. 50). This definition is similar to how Gee (1989) discusses discourses as "forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identifies as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes" (pp. 6-7). Discourses are complex and multiple discourses are constantly at work producing and constructing our position. Gee (1989) believed discourses could not be learnt through "overt instruction" (p. 7), but rather by being part of the context and supported by others who have already mastered the particular discourse. For Gee (1989), a number of discourses are in action constituting each person, these discourses are always changing, and often there is "conflict and tension between the values, beliefs, attitudes, interactional styles, uses of language, and ways of being in the world which two or more discourses represent" (p. 7).

As discussed earlier, language is a key tool for understanding and constructing the world (Turunen & Maatta, 2012). Everything we think or talk about is "constructed through language, manufactured out of discourse" (Burr, 1995, p. 57), and is culturally bound. The things people say and the way they present their understandings in written forms are

functions of discourse. Burr (1995) believes that knowledge is constructed out of the discourses available to us "which we draw upon in our communications with other people" (p. 51).

How social constructionism influenced what I paid attention to

Lock and Strong (2010, p. 2) believe "knowledge and social action go together". They take the view that "meaning and understanding have their beginnings in social action, in shared agreements as to what these symbolic forms are taken to be" (Lock & Strong, 2010, p. 7). The way teachers in their interactions with others constructed their knowledge and understanding of assessment practices was important to me. As such I paid particular attention to the times where teachers were negotiating and contesting their views of assessment with each other.

Teachers were producing and sustaining assessment knowledge and understanding within the interactions they had with each other and other members of the learning community. This included the things that teachers said to children, parents and other teachers regarding assessment. I endeavoured to listen carefully and tried to get close to teachers' understandings. This also meant I needed to be mindful of my own already established understandings of assessment and I tried to ensure that my understanding did not get in the way of getting closer to teachers' shared understandings and enactment of assessment. Assessment policies and the language used within documented assessment were also important to the study. It was not just about focusing on teachers' verbal language but also looking closely at the language teachers used to record assessments.

Setting

When considering where the study might take place some initial questions included: What type of settings should I approach? What size setting could fit the scope of the study? After much reading, thought and deliberation, in consultation with my research supervisors, I decided a privately owned setting in urban South Island Aotearoa New Zealand with a license for no more than 50 children would be preferable. Given the scope of the study working with a smaller number of teachers seemed to be a more manageable option. Due to the nature of my employment as a lecturer in early childhood education the decision was also made to attempt to find a setting where no current or previous students of the institution I work for were employed.

With initial search parameters set I began to use google search to identify privately owned centres within urban South Island with a license of less than 50 children. I spent three weeks identifying possible settings. Once a short list of three settings was developed I made initial contact with them. I placed a phone call to the settings outlining who I was and asking if there was a suitable time for me to come and meet with the centre manager to discuss the research. The first two settings contacted were currently working with a researcher on another project and therefore not interested in the project. The third setting expressed interest and a face to face meeting was scheduled with the manager. This initial visit was important to begin developing a rapport with the centre and to help gauge a sense of genuine interest in the research and to discuss the workload involved (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

During the first one and a half hour meeting I discussed the study with the manager and centre supervisor outlining what would be involved for the setting and teachers, providing copies of the information sheets for the manager to review. The manager expressed interest in the study and requested that she take copies of the information sheets to share with the teachers at the next staff meeting in two weeks. I followed up the meeting with an email thanking the manager for her time.

After taking the teacher information sheets to the meeting and talking with teachers the manager contacted me saying the setting would like to take part in the study. We arranged another staff meeting where I could meet the teaching team in the over twos and discuss the research further, this provided opportunities for teachers to ask me any questions about the research. The centre manager asked that I provide all teachers withcopies of the information sheets and consent forms within this meeting and that enough copies of the information and consent forms for all children and families were printed for teachers to distribute to families. I bought all copies along to the meeting with teachers and we discussed each point on the information sheet and consent forms.

During initial visits to the setting it became apparent that there were a number of levels of management within the setting. The setting was privately owned and though the owners still visited the setting and were involved in decisions regarding operations, a manager took care of the day to day administration of the setting. The manager worked part time in the setting and a centre supervisor, as well as a head teacher in the under twos and over twos were also in place. The majority of the teachers within the setting worked on a part time basis. In total there were nine teachers working on a permanent part time basis in the

over two area and four in the under twos with one teacher working full time. The centre owner, manager and supervisor were supportive of the study.

I worked on developing a good relationship with the setting by visiting as often as possible during the time access was being negotiated, generally two to three times a week during the first month. As per the managers request I completed a one page introduction of myself, including a photo, to place in the main entrance to the setting for children and families to begin becoming familiar with me. Visiting the setting regularly provided opportunities to talk with teachers, children, parents and families clarifying any aspects of the research. Providing plenty of time and opportunities for participants to think about the research and ask any questions was one way to help ensure that participants were as informed as possible (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

After considering the information and consent forms all teachers in the over two room and three teachers in the under two room signed and returned consent forms. Thirty two children and families within the setting completed consent forms, the majority of these children and families were within the over two room. Due to this, in consultation with the setting's management and my research supervisors, a decision was made to focus the research on the over two setting.

The setting operated as a full day early childhood setting and catered for children from birth to six years of age. The over two area was licensed for up to 33 children, with four full time teachers and a float teacher working within the over two area. The setting's daily programme offers a range of free-play learning experiences as well as planned learning experiences. The centre philosophy places emphasis on respect for the natural environment and sustainable practices are encouraged.

Participants

In an effort to preserve the anonymity of participants within this study I will be providing minimal details regarding teacher participants. Due to the small nature of the early childhood education profession within Aotearoa New Zealand I feel any additional details may make it possible to ascertain the identity of the setting and individual participants. Each participant was asked to select their own pseudonym during the consent process and I randomly selected names for those participants who did not select their own pseudonym. The names of the teachers listed here are pseudonyms, yet each of these names represents a teacher who gave their time to support this study. I introduce, Kate, Elle, Megan, Samantha, Sara, Angelina,

Andrea, Kristina, Harriet, Carla, Deborah and Penny. To further help ensure the anonymity of participants identifying details have been changed in some instances (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Kate, Elle, Megan, Samantha, Sara, Angelina, Andrea, Harriet, Carla and Penny all held a Diploma or Bachelor level early childhood education qualification recognised within New Zealand. Kristina held a teaching qualification completed in her home country as well as a Graduate Diploma in early childhood completed within New Zealand. All of the qualified teachers within the setting were either fully or provisionally registered teachers. At the time of the study Deborah was completing her first year of study towards a Bachelor level early childhood qualification. Teachers' experience within early childhood settings varied from 25 years teaching experience to 3 years working within an early childhood context.

Data gathering strategies

Qualitative research, Davidson and Tolich (2003) suggest, involves "a less formalised and more flexible data collection strategy" (p. 103). As already indicated, the data collection methods for this project were observations, field notes, document analysis, individual interviews and recording of the over two teachers' fortnightly staff meetings. These data collection methods fit with a qualitative approach as the intention was to get close to teachers' assessment understandings and practice by observing them and talking about their day to day assessment practices (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Data was gathered over a period of seven months between August 2014 and February 2015.

Observations

Detailed accounts of the early childhood setting and interactions within the setting were completed in the form of observations. These helped me to develop initial understandings of teachers' assessment practice within the setting. Davidson and Tolich (2003) regard observation as "a combination of observation and interviewing 'in the field'" (p. 133). The focus for observations was on teachers' assessment practices. This included teachers:

- taking photos/digital/video recordings of children's experiences
- making notes on children's experiences
- writing/typing assessments
- working on children's documented assessments
- adding assessment material to planning documentation

- talking with children, parents, families/whānau and other teachers about children's learning and assessment.

When I spoke with participants about the research and completed information and consent letters I made it clear that the focus was on teachers' understandings and assessment practices. I observed a range of interactions between children, teachers, parents and families/whānau and I did not record information that was not relevant to assessment understandings and practices. I also made it clear when I was spending time with teachers informally, such as within the staff room or non-contact room, that I would be writing field notes and asked if I could record informal conversations regarding assessment. At times teachers requested some conversations or parts of conversations were not recorded in field notes and this was respected.

During initial visits to the setting to complete observations I kept visits to "an hour or less" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 102) to ensure that details from the field could be remembered and recorded in field notes. I found as I became more confident in writing up field notes my memory of key points and moments relating to assessment increased. Toward the end of data collection two to three hours per visit was spent within the setting. During observations I needed to carefully consider to what extent I became involved in the setting. Too much participation might have led to the intentions of the research being lost and too little may have hindered me developing rapport (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). These decisions were made day by day, minute by minute and the level of participation depended on the day and situation. After leaving the setting I recorded key details of observations within a small notebook, these were then written up as field notes.

Field notes

Time was set aside as quickly as possible after each session in the setting to type detailed, accurate and extensive field notes describing people, places, events and conversations around assessment and assessment practices that occurred in the setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I recorded in field notes details of observations from within the setting, and written accounts to accompany any photos taken and documents collected. Conversations I had with participants regarding assessment were also recorded in field notes.

My observer comments were included in field notes in a separate column to help ensure important insights developed during data collection were recorded (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I continued revisiting field notes throughout the research process to add additional

observer comments where appropriate. All data was recorded double line spaced with a large left hand margin to support the coding process during data analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). After initial attempts at coding and developing themes line numbers were added to field notes and transcribed interviews to assist in keeping track of the data.

Document analysis

Relevant policies and support documents relating to assessment were collected. Informal discussions with teachers occurred to develop a greater understanding of the purpose of the documents; these were written up as field notes. Photos were taken of assessment related material around the setting and I ensured these photos did not feature children unless consent had already been sought. A limitation of observations and document analysis was that they uncovered little about teachers' understandings of assessment (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As an aim of this study was to understand how early childhood teachers view assessment it was imperative that the data collection methods I used sought to uncover these understandings in teachers' own words. Working with the setting over a period of time I came to find that individual and group discussions with teachers were proving more helpful to develop my understanding of teachers' views and understandings of assessment.

Group recorded meetings

After spending five weeks in the setting completing some initial observations and document analysis I was asked to attend fortnightly staff meetings. Visiting several times to complete observations helped to develop a relationship with the teachers in the setting and when it came time for the first recorded staff meeting I felt as though teachers were comfortable with me (Dilley, 2004). I got the sense teachers were becoming more comfortable with me when they began inviting me to events within the centre and teacher social events outside of the setting.

At the outset of the first group recorded staff meeting I spoke with teachers about the process of recording and transcribing the meetings. I made it clear again verbally that they could ask for recording to be stopped or later ask that information not be transcribed at any point. There were times during staff meetings where teachers requested recording stop or some information be excluded, this was respected.

Meetings were recorded on an audio recorder and transcribed using a new line when a new person speaks, and headings were used to help organise the different interview transcripts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).To support the transcribing process I asked that only one

teacher speak at a time (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). However, often when engaging in robust discussion at staff meetings many teachers were talking at once and some of these discussions proved inaudible and were unable to be recorded in transcripts. A copy of typed interview transcripts was given to each teacher in attendance at the staff meeting to read and edit (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001), these were provided in hard copy to each teacher involved in the staff meeting. I also offered to email copies of transcripts to teachers to review and edit, no teachers requested an emailed version. Teachers reviewed transcriptions of staff meetings and no requests to change recorded transcripts were made. Each group recorded staff meeting was within the teaching team's regular meeting time, which was an effort to minimise teachers' own personal time being taken up as part of the research. In total I attended and recorded nine fortnightly staff meetings.

During the time I was working with the setting teachers in the over twos were also completing a cycle of self-review on assessment practices. As part of the setting's self-review process teachers worked in pairs during two staff meetings reviewing children's profile books within the setting. Teachers asked that these conversations between three pairs of teachers be recorded also. In consultation with the head teacher profile books were selected of children and parents who had provided consent to ensure that teachers' conversations could be recorded.

Individual interviews

Due to a number of teachers within the setting working on a part time basis I had lengthy discussions with my research supervisors about how to manage individual interviews within the setting. A decision was made, based on the days I visited the setting and the teachers I tended to see on these days, that I would interview six teachers; Samantha, Kate, Elle, Megan, Kristina and Sara.

After four months visiting the setting on a regular basis I spoke with the centre manager about beginning individual interviews, together we discussed times that may suit the setting. Once the manager had confirmed possible days and times I spoke with teachers about individual interviews. The individual interviews happened over a three month period. Specific times were scheduled in consultation with teachers for semi-structured individual interviews. Each teacher was invited to select the setting for their individual interviews; all teachers selected the research setting for interviews (Turnock, 2009). Interviews took

anywhere from 30 to 60 minutes, and this time frame was indicated in the information letter and re-iterated verbally when arranging interview times with teachers.

Davidson and Tolich (2003) believe that the questions used in a qualitative interview should be kept to a minimum, suggesting the interview guide should be one page. I asked open-ended introductory questions based on emerging themes from observations to help get the teachers talking about their assessment stories (Davidson & Tolich, 2003). Based on the discussion and to help me develop a greater understanding of teachers' perspectives, a range of questions aimed at seeking clarification were also asked. I had some prepared prompt questions although depending on the focus of conversation I used a range of questions, which were often thought of in the moment to help clarify my understanding (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Davidson & Tolich, 2003). As a beginning researcher it was important for me to practice the questions and structure of the interviews prior to the interview. I discussed possible interview structure and questions with my supervisors and drew on their experience to support the interview process. After each individual interview I reflected on my interview technique and made changes and improvements as I went.

Research positioning

Rather than searching out evidence to prove or disprove hypotheses held prior to the study, I employed inductive logic or reasoning which involves using the data generated from the research to build understanding (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). This proved challenging as my experiences of assessment within early childhood settings meant that I went into the research setting with a preconceived notion of what assessment practice within the setting might 'look' like. I attempted to remain as open as possible to the process and not let my preconceived ideas about assessment influence developing an understanding of assessment practices within the setting. I made a conscious effort in the research setting when I caught myself judging assessment practices and noted this in my research diary. I discussed a number of my judgements with my research supervisors.

I have visited many early childhood settings throughout my time as a parent and working in the field of ECE and I feel relatively comfortable in most early childhood environments. However, as a researcher I was aware of my position within the research, my experiences in the field mean that in some contexts I may have been considered an insider (Cullen, 2005). Working as a teacher, centre manager, and now part time lecturer within

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Christchurch over the past decade also means that I know a number of teachers. I aimed to and did conduct the research in a setting where I did not have any previous relationships with any of the teachers within the setting. This proved challenging when setting initial parameters for selecting a setting, and a number of settings were contacted prior to selecting the final research setting. Although working with teachers I already knew could have been helpful in terms of developing relationships, being an outsider I felt would help to ensure that there was no conflict of interest. Nevertheless, a challenge of being a complete outsider was it took longer to develop relationships with teachers (Cullen, 2005). During the initial visits to the setting I focused on developing relationships with teachers in the setting.

Storage of data

All data was stored safely and securely, paper copies of data were stored in a locked cabinet. Electronic copies were stored on a computer requiring password access, backed up on an external hard drive as well as on a flash drive which was kept in a locked cabinet on the University of Canterbury Education campus. A back copy on a flash drive was also kept in a locked cabinet at my home.

Data analysis

Data analysis involved working throughout all of the data gathered, organising the data into manageable pieces and searching out key themes. I used inductive thinking to analyse the data, which is commonly used by qualitative researchers (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Inductive methods use the data as a source to develop understandings, rather than searching out data to prove or disprove previously held assumptions and beliefs (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Bogdan and Biklen (2007, p. 7) describe the process of analysis using inductive thinking as "like a funnel: Things are open at the beginning (or top) and more directed and specific at the bottom". This means that I closely studied each piece of data to develop understanding, attempting to be patient working between data already collected and new pieces of data to make sense of key emerging themes. Interview transcripts, documents and field notes were read and re-read to find emerging themes. I interpreted the data based on my frame of reference looking for common threads, relationships and differences across the data. As more and more data was collected this process became somewhat overwhelming at times and initial thoughts around key themes changed and developed as I analysed new pieces of data.

Data analysis happened through the study and each new piece of data and understanding was used to inform the data analysis in an on-going manner (Mills & Morton,

2013). However, most of the data analysis occurred at the end of data collection (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Due to the amount of data collected through the various data collection methods described above, one year was set aside to analyse the data. This was double the amount of time spent collecting data.

The data was coded and three initial coding categories emerged early in the data collection. I attempted to keep the number of general coding categories relatively small and a number of sub-codes were developed from the general codes (Atkinson & Coffey, 1996). A small number of coding categories helped to keep the data manageable and organise information relating to the same theme together, which was then broken down further (Atkinson & Coffey, 1996). The initial coding process took place in a paper form, going through sentences and paragraphs carefully to apply codes using a highlighter and notes in margins. Once the data had been coded in paper form information relating to each of the general codes was copied and pasted into separate documents to help aid organisation and retrieval of the data (Atkinson & Coffey, 1996; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

After the data had been coded initial analytical memos were written, focusing on emerging themes and patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Analytical memos aimed to be descriptive and focus on key points relating to teachers' understandings of assessment and assessment practices; supported by strong links to data (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). This proved challenging given the numerous sources of data as I found many sources of data connected to initial key themes. It seemed as though lots of pieces of data connected to initial key themes and some pieces of data connected to more than one theme. Time and careful consideration as well and the experience of my research supervisors helped to refine my thoughts on what to pay attention to. Emerging themes were tested out on teachers to see if my emerging understandings of assessment were on the right track (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I found that some teachers became "key informants" (Schnorr, 1997, p. 3) and were more prepared than others to share their ideas and understandings relating to assessment.

After leaving the field I made the decision to re-code each piece of data as I felt that initial thoughts surrounding key themes may have guided what I noticed about pieces of data which followed. Re-coding all data was time consuming however it proved fruitful in consolidating some initial key themes and changed the focus of other themes.

Ethical considerations

Mutch (2009) states that "if it is research, then it must follow ethical principles" (p. 76). However, others have pointed out that ethical principles cannot provide definite answers which need to be adhered to; they are rather guidelines which should be considered in relation to the context of the research (Kvale, 1996; Tolich & Davidson, 1999). Research with young children and negotiating which principles should to be foregrounded within the research setting was a complex task.

Throughout the process of gaining access and beginning to establish relationships within the setting it was imperative to me to be honest, truthful, persistent, flexible and creative (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). After ethical approval had been granted from the University of Canterbury a basic information letter outlining: the area of interest, purpose of the research, and an indication of what would be involved for the manager/supervisor/owner, centre, teachers, children and families was finalised.

This research would not have been undertaken without informed consent and I reflected on and spoke with my supervisors to ensure that potential harm was avoided (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Davidson & Tolich, 2003; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; University of Canterbury, 2009). Five key ethical principles of avoiding harm; voluntary participation; informed consent; avoiding deceit; and confidentiality and anonymity were at the forefront of the research. These were considered not only when seeking ethical approval, but throughout the entire course of the research study (Cullen, 2005; Mutch, 2005; Snook, 2003; Tolich & Davidson, 1999).

Mutch (2005) talks about harm in relation to participant safety, ensuring participants are not "subject to physical, psychological, emotional, or cultural harm"; and researcher safety, ensuring that researchers "take care not to place themselves in positions of physical or emotional distress" (p. 79). Possible harm could come in many forms and it was not until during data collection and later in the research process that questions about potential harm to teachers within the setting came up (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). The early childhood teachers within the setting were considered in relation to harm throughout the research process but particularly during the process of writing up the research. Researching taken-for-granted assessment practices within the setting meant that at times teachers faced questions and practices they voiced they felt uncomfortable confronting; in these times teachers often asked that aspects of discussions and interviews not be transcribed and this was also respected.

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Tolich and Davidson (1999) suggest that if the research is likely to make participants face aspects of themselves which they may feel uncomfortable delving into then the research must be "theoretically valid and socially significant" (p. 71). I sought the support and guidance of my supervisors in helping to determine this (Tolich & Davidson, 1999).

As I collected assessment material from within the setting I also needed to consider potential harm in relation to children and their parents/caregivers and family/whānau. It was important for me to as clearly as possible explain the purpose of the research was to look at how teachers are assessing children's learning, rather than looking specifically at children's learning. As an outsider in the setting it was ethical for me to seek parental consent from the majority of children and parents within the setting. As part of the consent form for children I outlined the purpose of the research and data collection methods in simple terms avoiding educational jargon.

Using a gatekeeper, in this instance the centre manager to help negotiate access, meant it was challenging to ensure that the setting and teachers were participating on a voluntary basis. Teachers may have felt "coerced to participate" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 49). All parties taking part in this research were informed about the purpose, aims and possible ways the research will be used, such as for the completion of a Master's thesis and possibly presented at research conferences and within educational journals (Mutch, 2005; Tolich & Davidson, 1999). Participants were provided with the necessary information to make an informed choice regarding whether they would like to participate in the research. The key here was choice and participants could choose not to participate or to withdraw their consent at any stage of the research (University of Canterbury, 2009). All teachers and the majority of children and families within the over two area of the setting returned a signed consent form. The University of Canterbury's (2009) Education Research Human Ethics Committee's principles and guidelines say that; when research involves young children, children should not be forced to participate and in addition to children's consent, written informed consent from parents or guardians must be obtained. As part of the parents' consent form, I also included a space for parents to sign stating that they had spoken with their children about the research.

Deceit I hope was avoided by ensuring relationships I developed with participants were honest and truthful in relation to the research (Snook, 2003). However, the nature of qualitative research meant that the aims I started out with changed and developed slightly

during the process of gathering data. This was considered at various stages throughout the research (Tolich & Davidson, 1999) and I found toward the end of data gathering I was spending more time talking with teachers about their assessment practices and less time observing within the setting.

It was important for me to report the data truthfully and faithfully but at times this felt at odds with keeping the teachers safe from harm (Davidson & Tolich, 2003). I carefully considered the wording I used to describe teachers' assessment experiences. I often considered whether what teachers were saying may not be what management of the setting or other teachers wanted to hear. At times I made the decision to not transcribe pieces of data or exclude particular pieces of data as I felt it may put teachers at risk of harm.

It was my responsibility all the way through the research process to consider confidentiality and anonymity. Particularly at the end when it came to making decisions about how to write up the research (Snook, 2003). I needed to make decisions about how much information to provide regarding the setting and participants. Given that the early childhood community in New Zealand is relatively small, the smallest details may have made it relatively easy for the reader to ascertain the research site and possible participants. Being able to narrow down the setting meant that anonymity could not be assured. I made the decision to write this research up providing very few details about the setting and participants to help support anonymity (Mutch, 2005).

Teachers' time was also an ethical consideration that I was very aware of within the research. As discussed earlier, group recorded meetings coincided with a regular fortnightly meeting times within the setting and individual interviews took place at a time that teachers chose. One way to ensure that informed consent for interviews was gained was by indicating at the time of gaining permission for these interviews how long the interview was likely to take (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Credibility

Prolonged participation within settings is a key aspect of ethnography (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Mills & Morton, 2013). As highlighted earlier, I spent a period of seven months within the setting visiting two to three times a week for up to three hours at a time. This prolonged participation helps to establish the credibility of the study.

Sharing data with participants is another way the credibility of findings can be strengthened (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I gave each teacher a paper copy of transcripts to read, review and provide feedback. Sharing data allowed me to check that interpretations were a fair representation of teachers' assessment understandings and actions within the setting.

Data collection and analysis was planned and presented to my thesis supervisors and approved by the University of Canterbury's (2009) Education Research Human Ethics Committee. Having my supervisors read, review and approve research plans helps to ensure that the research is credible and adheres to ethical considerations.

Highlighting my research positioning and being aware of my own biases and assumptions also helps to ensure the credibility of the research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Keeping a research diary helped me to pay attention to the instances were my own understandings of assessment potentially got in the way of developing a greater understanding of this group of teachers' lived assessment experiences.

Limitations of the research

A limitation of the study could be that it is only one setting and group of teachers' understandings of assessment and assessment practices. Within qualitative research it is common to a smaller range of participants and ensuring the data is rich in detail helps to support credibility (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Teachers' quotes and aspects of other data are used to illustrate points and tell the teachers' assessment stories in their own words (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

A limitation of the use of observations and document analysis is they may have uncovered little about teachers' understandings of assessment. As an aim of this study wass to understand how early childhood teachers understand and enact assessment it is imperative that data collection methods which seek to uncover these understandings in teachers' own words be used. A range of data collection methods have been used to help develop an understanding of teachers' assessment understandings.

My inexperience as a researcher is also a key limitation of the study, in particular in relation to my interview technique. When reading through the transcripts of the six individual interviews I became aware that my questions may have at times meant I missed opportunities to follow up comments and develop greater understandings.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity is described by Harrison et al. (2001, p. 323) as "the give and take of social interactions". It was really important to me that this study not only support my research but also in some small way honoured and respected the time and effort teachers put into the journey. I thought about and discussed with my research supervisors early in the research process some of the ways I might be able to give back to the children and teachers within this setting.

Early in the research process the setting indicated that they would be completing a cycle of self-review alongside the study and we talked about some of the ways the data I would be collecting for the study could contribute to the setting's self-review process. After discussion with the centre manager and head teacher a decision was made that fortnightly meeting minutes, transcribed by me, would provide valuable information teachers could use to support the self-review process. Due to my position as a student at the University of Canterbury I also had access to a wide range of literature through the library and various search engines. I offered to search for articles addressing subjects of interest for teachers. Through the course of the study teachers asked about three specific areas of interests and I used the search engine EBSCO host to find six articles for teachers.

This chapter has provided an overview of qualitative research and ethnography. A description of social constructionism which guided the study has been detailed, including how this theoretical positioning influenced what I paid attention to. Data gathering and analysis was discussed and the research participants and setting were briefly introduced without compromising anonymity. Five key ethical principles were used to guide this study and these were discussed in terms of the decisions I made to ensure that the research adhered to ethical considerations at all times. The chapter concludes with a discussion relating to credibility and some of the limitations of the study. The next two chapters introduce key research findings and discuss some of the ways teachers were shifting assessment practice and working hard to get it 'right'.

Chapter 4 - Shifting assessment practice

This chapter will discuss some of the complexities and challenges teachers faced as they worked with a strength based model of assessment. As discussed in chapter 1, sociocultural perspectives to assessment within early childhood contexts in Aotearoa New Zealand are still relatively new and many teachers can still remember and possibly hold on to the days when developmental style assessments were common practice within ECE settings. As noted in chapter 2, ideas and perspectives are not easily replaced and often new ideas are layered on top of older ideas (Hill, 2011). Teachers in this setting have lived through a number of changes within the early childhood sector and are continuing to figure out how these changes and developments relate to their daily work with children. Working in a team environment adds another level of complexity to this as teachers are not only coming to terms with their own stance on how theory relates to practice but are also negotiating collective views within the teaching team. Fleer (2010, p. 205) believes that in order to shift practice from one framework to another the "challenge must be acknowledged and respected and a series of supports offered in the transition". This group of teachers, like many other teaching teams, missed out on the opportunity to participate in the professional development surrounding *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a) and are continuing to negotiate what assessment means within their setting.

Teachers in this setting were grappling with what to do with deficits in an inherently credit based assessment model. Although childrens' perceived 'needs' were regularly discussed, often 'needs' failed to be placed within documented assessment. If areas of 'need' were discussed within learning stories they were reframed and spoken about positively. Teachers also continued to attempt to strike a balance between individual and group learning stories, with some teachers questioning core aspects of the learning story framework as a sociocultural means of assessing children's learning. What to document and how to document children's learning was debated at length by teachers as they struggled to make assessment manageable and meaningful for all members of the learning community. Lack of time to document assessments and have in-depth conversations with children, parents and other teachers was a key factor contributing to teachers' assessment decision making.

Deficit to credit and somewhere in the middle

Staff meetings within the setting provided the main opportunities for teachers to discuss their values and beliefs together as a team. Often staff meetings provided rich sites for teachers

where differing theoretical perspectives were investigated in relation to assessment practices within the setting. Teachers engaged in many professional conversations about assessment practices and often used individual examples of children's learning and assessment as points for discussion. The following discussion between Penny and Samantha illustrates some of the ways teachers were talking about children's learning and development and attempting to negotiate how this may look in practice.

> Penny: are you writing down that if we have seen some needs that need strengthening and working on… if you see a child that is really struggling walking two foot, I don't know how you would write that up but that's something that I see as a goal for him to try and walk so how do you write that up working on a child's needs and setting a goal

> Samantha: I was just writing a story last night and I thought nah this is completely wrong I had to go back to it and the development he's already starting to and he's a lot better he was looking for solutions, I asked him what are your solutions for this he said playing with trains

This example shows that for some teachers shifting lenses from deficit to credit was not easy, and it was often not one or the other but a combination. Penny felt that documenting children's needs and working to strengthen children in areas of need was important and had a place within children's documented assessment. Penny often discussed children's needs as an important part of the programme and felt that teachers should be setting clear goals to support children within these areas, with the aim of filling this gap. Samantha was a bit more cautious about documenting children's areas of perceived need within assessment and often shied away from discussing needs within documented assessment. Children setting their own goals and finding their own solutions to problems was important for Samantha. However Samantha struggled to write about children's goals positively within learning stories and in this instance went back to the child's development to re-frame the story.

Children setting their own goals and being actively involved within assessment practices is a key feature of formative and sociocultural assessment and is highlighted within *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004f). Formative assessment practices where children are involved in self-assessment are suggested by some as being essential to effective teaching (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003; Black & Wiliam, 1998, 2009). On the one hand Samantha is stating encouraging the child to set his own goals and have a voice

is important and was almost giving credit to the child for setting his own goals. On the other hand, Samantha still went back to the child's development when struggling to talk about learning positively. This could suggest that Samantha is juggling two assessment frameworks, credit based formative assessment where children set their own goals is valued however developmental perspectives are still drawn on.

Viewing children as valuable members of the learning community, with valuable contributions to make could require a major shift in thinking for some and teachers were all at differing places on this journey. Needs based thinking is reminiscent of developmental theory which suggests that all children should progress through predetermined stages of development at the same rate, denying any developmental variations (Matusov et al., 2007).

Balancing contrasting views of assessment

Developmental theory could still have a strong grip on teachers' practices and although some teachers were indicating that they were, in part, influenced by credit perspectives of learning often developmental theory crept into the way teachers talked about children's learning. Teachers were often referring to children's strengths, interests and abilities as well as children's perceived needs. For Kate assessment was a combination of highlighting areas of strength and supporting children in areas of need.

Kate: so I really try to focus on something that is going so well and something that needs a little support.

Teachers were balancing two contradictory frameworks, strength and needs based models were both being used to support teachers' assessment practices. Whilst teachers valued highlighting children's strengths and positive attributes they also felt it was important not to ignore the areas teachers felt children needed help in.

Megan: we don't just want to focus on that he needs this help, yes we know that we are aware of that, but you want to look at other amazing stuff he is doing.

For Megan it is a combination of both needs and strengths, she is suggesting it is important to know about children's needs but also focus on children's strengths. In the same sentence here Megan is discussing the importance of two conflicting approaches to children's learning and assessment, potentially highlighting how her own views of children's learning from a developmental perspective still influence assessment practice. When Megan first started working in the early childhood sector "Te Whāriki wasn't even around so there was

not guidelines for us to work from. There was no curriculum so assessment has come a long way since I have been teaching that is for sure. I think it is a great thing that assessment has changed… for the better, as much as it is hard work that is when you have to just keep going back and getting professional development, re-training and just keeping up with the trends it is good"

Megan is acknowledging that changes in assessment are a good thing however it can be hard work to keep up with the trends. Moving with the times and key trends is seen as positively supporting teachers' professional development and practice. In fact the *Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations* (New Zealand Government, 2008) 43 Curriculum standard general requires every licensed service to (iii) reflect "an understanding of learning and development that is consistent with current research, theory, and practices in early childhood education". However shifting from one perspective to the next is not as easy as it sounds. Hill (2011, p. 8) states "when the theories that are espoused to lie at the heart of practice, are closely examined, older ideas are often still found to have a grip on the way things are done". In terms of assessment practices this could mean that the traditional approaches to development teachers were largely exposed to within their initial teacher education can be hard to shift.

Previous studies investigating assessment practices within Aotearoa New Zealand ECE settings have also noted that teachers struggled to make the shift. Davis' (2006) thesis which in part looked at teachers' understanding of and assessment practices, also identified that teachers were finding the shift in assessment practice challenging. Davis (2006) found that although teachers perceived they were using narrative assessment models they were relying on more traditional assessment models of assessment. This is supported by Schurrs' (2009) study, investigating teachers' assessment practices in infant and toddler settings, which stated that "change is slow to happen; assessment varies from centre to centre" (p. 11). When teachers talked about assessment in her study they tended to use more developmental language rather than socio-cultural approaches (Schurr, 2009). Turnock (2009) also reported that formative assessment practice often gave way to more summative assessment forms of assessment and teachers in her study were reported to be using what she described as a "mish-mash of assessment practices" (p. 50). These studies were all completed nearly a decade ago now and the findings in this study show that teachers may still be struggling to shift assessment practices, and decide whether deficits have a place in a credit based model.

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Teachers in this study struggled at times to make decisions about what should be recorded within learning stories. Although teachers talked about children's 'needs' with each other, parents and children these often did not appear to have a place in documented assessments. What to record, how it should be recorded and whether learning stories should be based on individual children or groups of children was often the focus of discussion for teachers.

What to record? Group learning stories versus individual learning stories

As highlighted in the discussion above developmental theory focuses on the child as an individual and sociocultural perspectives focus on children within the context of their everyday settings, emphasising interactions within these social environments (Agbenyega, 2009; Fleer, 2010; Hill, 2011). Viewing children's learning as individualistic could mean teachers assess to find out children's interests and then plan relatively individualistic goals to support these interests. The focus is largely on individual development rather than the children within the context of a social setting (Fleer, 2010). Whereas assessing children within the context of relationships with others in social settings connects more to sociocultural cultural perspectives. Teachers within this setting debated at length whether group learning stories which highlighted children's relationships with others and the environment are appropriate, or whether learning stories should focus on the individual child.

Group learning stories

Assessment should, according to *Te Whāriki,* be "influenced by the relationships between adults and children, just as children's learning and development are influenced by the relationships they form with others. This influence should be taken into consideration during all assessment practice" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 30). According to *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004a, p. 4) "sociocultural approaches to assessment reflect the interconnecting social and cultural worlds of children". These quotes highlight that assessment from a sociocultural perspectives means showing children's learning within the context of their relationships with others in social and cultural settings is important. Fleer (2010) discusses this using the term "proximal assessment" (p. 200) where teachers make judgements on what children can do when interacting with others in a group situation.

Group learning was valued within the setting and teachers spent a lot of time talking about how they could write about group learning within learning stories as well as making it relevant for individual children. Teachers valued the relationships children had with each

other and actively fostered children establishing and maintaining relationships, with a strong focus on group experiences within the setting and the wider local community. There was a sense however that group learning stories were not enough and were not as 'meaningful' for individual children.

> Samantha: I don't know how much of my time is writing group stories that are not necessarily meaningful.

There was a mix of viewing group learning as important, with teachers planning to support group learning experiences, as well as ensuring that individual children's learning was discussed. For Kristina this meant writing group learning stories and making sure that at the end of the story the individual child was discussed.

> Kristina: for group learning and putting that child in just putting a little wee note on the bottom I really noticed you.

Here Kristina is referencing how she generally writes group learning stories and each child involved in the group will have the story added to their profile book, with specific details about the individual child toward the end of the story. This could be considered a combination of sociocultural assessment, focusing on the child within the context of their relationships, and individual assessment of children's interests.

When looking through individual children's profile books in pairs some teachers discussed the 'quality' of a learning story in relation to whether it was an individual or group learning story. When ERO discussed effective assessment practice they prioritised individualised assessments, where "teachers identified children's individual strengths, interests and abilities" (Education Review Office, 2013b, p. 13). Some teachers and parents within this setting also felt individualised assessments were important. Kate and Kristina even questioned whether a group learning 'counted' as a learning story for a child

> Kristina: okay well that's just a story
> Kate: it's a group story for me it is not even about Louise

Kate concluded that group learning would be acceptable "if you just use the child's name and then it is all about her". When summarising the parent survey Kate also shared with the team that one parent had expressed concern that learning stories were "not very specific

to the child". Teachers were conscious of parents' views of assessment and wanted to make sure assessment was working for everyone involved. There was a lot of discussion during staff meetings about how teachers could make assessment more meaningful. Parents seemed to want more of a focus on their own child within learning stories and teachers were actively investigating possible ways they could highlight individual children's learning more effectively for parents within learning stories.

Individual learning stories

Megan felt that the setting recorded group learning well, however worried about how individual children's learning was being documented. During the data collection period the setting started to put more emphasis on talking about individual children during staff meetings and a sheet was put in the staff room for teachers to add names of the child they wished to discuss at the next meeting.

> Megan: When it comes to individual that is where our assessment lacks a little bit. Group type learning and assessment works really well here, in saying that though you can get individual learning from that but then there are children that get missed from it so that's when we have to make sure that their learning is highlighted more in their profile books.

Teachers were using a mixture of group learning stories which were often displayed around the setting and beginning to focus on ways they could highlight individual children's learning more effectively. Megan felt group learning stories meant that some children have a number of learning stories as they are involved in many experiences within the setting, whereas other children may be missed. As head teacher of the over two's Megan was concerned with ensuring that all children had recent and relevant learning stories, and within staff meetings had begun to prioritise time discussing individual children's learning and documented assessments. Samantha in particular noted that more time to discuss individual children with other teachers was valuable and these discussions changed knowledge and understanding of children's learning within the setting. As she said, "more time to talk about individuals as a group I find that that's when, yeah you have a picture of a child and that can change just depending on who they are with and so yeah again it comes back to the group perspective and group ideas".

Feedback from the parent survey completed as part of the setting's self-review process highlighted that parents wanted to know about their child's individual learning and

preferred individual learning stories which focused specifically on their child. This aligns with ERO who found "highly individualised" assessment where "children's learning was highly visible and accessible to children and parents" reflected highly reflective assessment practices (Education Review Office, 2013b, p. 8). Teachers in the setting were, it seemed, beginning to make the shift toward more individualised learning stories. However, this could potentially be at odds with the sociocultural nature of *Te Whāriki* and *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a). Teachers continued to discuss the learning story framework and what should be in learning stories.

What constitutes a learning story?

There was debate amongst teachers as to whether group learning stories could even be considered a learning story and this was particularly evident when teachers worked in pairs evaluating individual children's profile books. Andrea, a new teacher, joined the team during the data collection process and was trying to figure out assessment practices within the setting. Below Andrea engages in a discussion with Kristina regarding the value group learning stories which had been included in Beth's profile book.

> Andrea: another group story which just has a photo but not necessarily, she could have been there for a second
>
> Kristina: was she terrified? Was she excited? You don't know…and then this is the question these are all little things that you are watching this child go through is that learning? You are still capturing some learning but how do we
>
> Andrea: yeah, what's it showing of Beth do you mean?...I guess you bypass, those are great for seeing the things that you are up to and the whole centre is up to and the amazing learning opportunities that they have and the personal ones are the more in depth ones.

Andrea felt that individual personal learning stories were more in depth, and questioned the place of group learning stories within individual children's profile books. This excerpt not only shows how Andrea and Kristina are trying to make sense of assessment practices but also brings into to question what constitutes valuable learning within the setting and who gets to decide what is most valuable. It seems as though group learning experiences which would highlight a sociocultural standpoint are seen as less valuable. Individualised assessments are deemed by Andrea as the personal ones where more in depth connections can

be made. Kate and Kristina also questioned the place of group learning stories within profile books and felt that individual stories were more relevant.

Kate: it's a group story for me it is not even about Louise

Kristina: yep, exactly

Kate: and is it just a good to know story or is it actually a learning story?

Kristina: yeah because I don't even know if she participated

Kate: that's a learning story it is all about Louise her interests in it what is happening now and here is the what next…if you just use the child's name then it is all about her that's a group story with her involved in it lovely analysing so parents can see. Even a what next, but for her it is just how to see that it is for her.

Kate is working through whether group learning stories are 'actually a learning story' and felt that the stories which were all about Louise were definitely learning stories. If individual learning stories, including a 'what next' relevant for the child, are classed as learning stories and group learning stories are not it could be assumed that children's interactions with others and learning in a group setting is not seen by some teachers as valuable information to record. A recent study suggests it is not necessarily whether teachers are recording individual or group learning stories that is important but rather the "depth of purpose" which is important (Mitchell et al., 2015a, p. 13). Depth of purpose was described as a combination of individual and group learning stories as well as stories for "specific times and purposes" (Mitchell et al., 2015a, p. 13). Teachers in this setting wanted to get it right and strike a balance between group stories and individual learning stories, there were also tensions around what was considered 'learning' and worthy of documenting. Teachers were trying to find this balance individually and collectively as a group. Engaging in conversations surrounding assessment practices provided rich sites for teachers to continue to negotiate assessment practices within the setting and what was considered valuable learning.

What to do with deficits in a credit based model? Struggles and tensions

Sara: It's weird we are sort of programmed to have like a set of acceptable things to write about.

Very early on in discussions with teachers I noticed that there were tensions around what was deemed as 'acceptable' to document within assessments. The first recorded staff meeting highlighted some of the struggles teachers were having in relation to recording what might be seen as children's deficits. When discussing children's 'problem behaviour' and the progress children were making in the identified area, teachers questioned whether these behaviours should/were being recorded in profile books. As highlighted above by Sara some teachers felt they were 'programmed' to talk about children's positive attributes and anything that was deemed to show children in a negative light was unacceptable to write about in learning stories. This meant that areas teachers had identified as 'needs' were very contentious and teachers were searching for ways to address perceived 'needs' within documented assessments.

'Needs' based assessment

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996) discusses 'needs' in part A of the curriculum in particular, where it states "continuous observations provide the basis of information for more in-depth assessment and evaluation that is integral to making decisions on how best to meet children's needs"(p.29). However, *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004f) focuses much more on strengths, interests, abilities and credit based learning assessments. *An Introduction to Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004a) discusses how assessments should foreground "children's strengths and achievements" highlighting that "assessment notes what children can do when they are "at their best"" (p. 18). This change in focus could leave teachers unsure about what to do with 'needs', where do needs fit in a credit based assessment framework?

Traditional forms of assessment such as developmental checklists which some teachers in this setting had experienced focused on what children could not yet do and goals were set to support children within these areas. Learning stories aim to emphasis children's strengths, interests, abilities, learning dispositions and working theories. Needs are no longer mentioned within *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a).

Struggling to know what do with needs for teachers in this setting meant that needs were sometimes ignored in documented assessments. Teachers supported children in areas which had been identified as needs, and areas children were developing in were regularly a point for discussion with families. However, this information was often not reflected in documented assessments. Sara in particular engaged in numerous conversations with parents

about children's learning and was honest with the fact that the majority of these discussions about children's needs were not documented in assessments.

Teachers often discussed individual children's 'needs' and 'problem behaviours' within staff meetings. The excerpt to follow shows some of the ways teachers were talking about needs in relation to learning stories.

Kate: So how do we address it (referring to 'problem behaviour') in our stories?

Penny: You couldn't write a story about that but that's what I see

Sara: If we didn't we are doing children quite a disservice 'cause we all recognise he's got needs. I think it comes back to sometimes it feels like we are writing about quite sensitive topics, how do you write about that nicely, oh so and so is crying like a baby again.

Teachers were recognising and responding to what might be considered developmental/behavioural 'needs' discussing these with parents and as a team, but struggled to place these experiences in a credit based assessment framework . Most staff meetings in one way or another discussed some of the challenges children were facing and the strategies teachers were using to support children. However, teachers articulated that children's 'needs' and developments in these areas were frequently not addressed within documented assessments as they were not areas you could write about 'nicely'.

Sara and Kristina questioned the validity of only documenting strengths. Sara and Kristina both explicitly questioned whether challenging and sensitive topics where children were identified as having needs was being written about at all by teachers.

Sara: This is what we write about but sometimes we are missing out the things that are most important. Like Matt and his co-ordination and Martyn and his tears and there are probably a dozen things we can think of off the top of our heads

Kristina: So it is a bit like are we putting a token gesture to the child's day?

Deficits and areas children were developing in were side-lined as teachers grappled with what to do with deficits in a credit based model. Needs had almost become part of the hidden assessment curriculum as they were generally missing from documented assessments. Teachers were supporting children in areas of perceived need within the programme and

provided a range of experiences to foster children's developing competencies nonetheless these tricky areas were tough to talk about and often did not show up in documented assessment.

'Needs' under the assessment radar

As highlighted above teachers were supporting children in areas that been identified as a need, so needs were part of the enacted curriculum (McLachlan, Fleer, & Edwards, 2013). However, often children's needs did not feature in documented assessment. If needs were included in documented assessment they were discussed in a positive way.

> Sara: I'll discuss it with the parents so for me this little girl we are having lot of issues with she is at that tricky two year old age and she is biting and really having trouble and that is my very PC way (reading an excerpt) 'she is developing an ability to let a range of children play alongside her and join in with their play' and she did and I am trying to be very positive. We have to be alongside her a lot of the times and be ready to stop her pushing, shoving and biting so that for me…will go in the book I will discuss it with mum, where will it go from there well for me really my goal for her is her socialisation and learning some prosocial skills.

> This excerpt highlights that, for Sara, if 'needs' were to appear in documented assessment then they should be discussed positively. Here Sara has reframed the child's behaviour of biting and pushing and phrased it positively within a learning story. Ultimately however the goal of socialisation and prosocial skills is still based on an identified deficit. Although Sara has put a positive spin on the child's behaviour so that it seems to be coming from a credit perspective the aim is still to support the child in an area which has been identified as a need.

> Teachers within this setting are using an inherently credit based assessment model, learning stories, although at times it was being used to document children's needs in a positive way. This may suggest that teacher's practices have not changed much since the introduction of the learning story framework; teachers had simply found a way to use learning stories in a way that looked as though the focus was on strengths, interests and abilities. Bennett (2011) cautions it is not the assessment instrument which is important but rather how it is used. If teachers are using learning stories to simply highlight children's

needs in a positive manner, then learning stories could be lending themselves to supporting what teachers already do (Alvestad et al., 2009). This may bring the authenticity of assessment into question.

Assessment authenticity

Teachers really struggled with what to do with their knowledge of children that did not fit into a credit based model. Should 'needs' be documented and if not was only recording strengths being dishonest to children's time in the setting? This was a question Sara in particular was concerned with. For Sara what to record raised questions about authenticity and whether what teachers were documenting within assessments was a fair and honest reflection of children's time within the setting.

Authentic assessment was an important aspect of assessment to consider for Sara. According to Browne and Gordon (2013, p. 98) for assessment to be authentic it "must occur in a variety of settings, over time, drawing on many sources of information". Although Carr (2001) does not use the term authentic assessment in her earlier writings surrounding effective assessment she talks about assessment being: credit based, in the context of everyday real life experiences, involving a range of participants (children, teachers, family and whānau), formative, and that most assessment is undocumented. Generally authentic assessment aims to find out more about whom the child is in the context of everyday settings, utilising as many peoples' understandings as possible. McLachlan, Edwards and Fleer (2013, p. 30) believe authentic assessment is "the use of assessment strategies and approaches to seek to determine the real understandings and ideas children have about their learning". Authentic assessment differs from person to person, depending on priorities. Sara felt that documented assessments should be a true reflection of children's time within the setting and used her knowledge of children to evaluate her own and other teachers documented assessments.

> Sara: If I am doing work myself or receiving it from another teacher I just want it to be something that rings true for that child. Not something that is fabricated for that child or made to look all fluffy or written to make the parents feel good. So it has to be authentic and has to have some resonance with me and not to say that I necessarily have to agree, all teachers have different perspectives we don't all have to agree with each other but it would have to have some thought, care and authenticity behind it and to be personal to that child.

Sara sought to understand children better and document real understandings of children's time within the setting. Sara advocated for professional discussions and felt that these helped to build a stronger picture of children and provide a more authentic picture of children's experiences. Some of this was documented within children's assessments however as highlighted by Carr (2001) most assessment is undocumented and contained within teachers' heads.

Significant learning in teachers' heads

Sara: The things we contain in our mind and you see relationships developing and look how we nurture that you know we position them together at morning tea and we might invite them to go and wash their hands together and we do not write all that stuff up we are just constantly nurturing that and it becomes stronger and stronger.

Using assessment information to inform curriculum decisions was an area some teachers were working on. When questioned whether a significant learning moment Sara had discussed would be documented she said, "do you know what the day to day reality is I know that particular boy will have lots of stories so no…which is a bit sad isn't it I know in a good quality best practice I probably should write this down this is really significant for this child, but actually I don't think I will". Here Sara had noticed a significant learning moment for a child and was honest in the fact that she would not be documenting this learning for the child, noting that time was a key factor in her decision not to document the sufficient learning in this instance.

Teachers talked about a range of experiences and events which they felt were significant learning for children, sometimes this learning was recorded within documented assessments however, often this information stayed in teachers' heads. When investigating primary teachers' assessment practices in the 1990's Hill (2003, p. 4) discussed "headnoting" where teachers relied on their memories of what children could do to guide teaching practices. In Hill's (2003) study teachers tended to focus more on 'teaching' than on documenting assessment. Interestingly in this early childhood setting teachers also seemed to focus more on 'teaching' than on documenting children's learning assessments. As shown above Sara talks about the information in her mind that she uses to guide her supporting children developing relationships, but this information is not something she writes down. Teachers were busy and used their knowledge of children to guide teaching and learning experiences on a daily basis, however these experiences frequently went undocumented.

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Samantha: yeah that's the hurdle because there is so much assessment going on that's not documented just because you don't you the time.

Samantha is recognising the amount of assessment happening within the setting and often choices about what to document come down to time. This inherently suggests that a large portion of assessment in this setting is undocumented.

Undocumented assessment

Kei Tua o te Pae introduced the concept of noticing, recognising and responding and discuss these as progressive filters where "teachers notice a great deal as they work with children, and they recognise some of what they notice as "learning". They will respond to a selection of what they recognise" (Ministry of Education, 2004a, p. 6). Carr and Lee (2012) later added recording and revisiting to these progressive filters. They believe only a small percentage of what teachers notice, recognise and respond to will be recorded and revisited (Carr & Lee, 2012). The exemplars within *Kei Tua o te Pae* aim to support teachers in closing the gap between noticing, recognising and responding, and feedback is important to this (Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a). Feedback can happen in many ways and some feedback will be verbal and non-verbal in the moment, whilst "some of this feedback will be through documentation" (Ministry of Education, 2004a, p. 6). *Kei Tua o te Pae* suggests "some assessment will be documented, but most of it will not" (Ministry of Education, 2004a, p. 11) believing that teachers should strike a balance between documented and undocumented interactions. The purpose of documentation according to *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004a, p. 12) "is that it will inform everyday, undocumented, interactive teaching and spontaneous feedback, making children's interactions richer and more complex".

Teachers in this setting documented children's learning within learning stories, which were included in children's portfolios and at times displayed on the walls around the setting. Daily happenings sheets were also completed and these were displayed in the entrance for parents and children to read. Teachers regularly commented how decisions about whether to document children's learning often came down to time. Teachers were noticing what was happening, recognising some of the learning that was occurring and using this information to inform everyday practice, and if time and circumstances allowed were documenting some of children's learning. Megan felt that decisions about what to document often came down to too much information and not enough time.

Megan: we are constantly busy on the floor and I think sometimes that we miss lots of learning opportunities. Or you can't record it you haven't got the time to really record it or you are taking photos...and it comes to your non-contact and you have got too much and you really want to do it but it is a time restraint that really holds you back.

Teachers consistently discussed lack of time as a key factor in deciding which learning moments would be documented within assessments.

Time to document learning

All teachers in the setting felt that there was not enough time to record all of the significant learning they saw happening on a daily basis and writing learning stories was often rushed and a scramble. Teachers were very explicit about the perceived lack of time and regularly commented within meetings and individual interviews that time was a major factor. Time held teachers back and teachers wanted more time to document the learning that was happening within the setting. Samantha, Kristina and Elle all explicitly spoke about time constraints and assessment being 'rushed' and 'a scramble' within their individual interviews.

Samantha: you are rushed 'cause you are trying to get the stories out sometimes you actually you don't have the time

Kristina: it is quite challenge because you are worried about your own time with those two little hours a week and it's a scramble you go out there thinking how many minutes per story is this

Elle: one of the worst things for me is not actually spending that time to write that information down and share it with parents.

Time was a key factor for teachers within this setting they wanted to make assessment work and do a good job for children, families and indeed themselves. Teachers needed to make careful decisions about what to record within their allocated non-contact time. Each teacher within the setting who completed children's profile books received a minimum of two non-contact hours per week to complete assessment related documentation, generally in the form of learning stories. Anecdotally two hours per week non-contact seems to be about the average and there are currently no requirements for a minimum amount of non-contact time for teachers in ECE settings. The latest *Report of the Advisory Group on Early Learning* (Ministry of Education, 2015c) does however recommend "all early childhood education and

care services make available teacher enquiry time equivalent to two hours non-contact time per qualified teacher per week, to support professional development activities" (p. 7).

One of the key criticisms of the learning story framework is the amount of time it takes for teachers to write a rich learning narrative. Dunphy (2010) suggests that although learning stories provide rich narratives of children's learning they are time consuming and teachers may prefer to use less time consuming assessment methods. Blaiklock (2013b, p. 39) also suggesting that learning stories can have benefits but argues that "these benefits can also occur with easier more practical approaches (e.g., photos with anecdotes or Learning Notes)". Carr (2001, p. 18) also acknowledged that with the introduction of narrative approaches teachers "have had to develop ways in which these more story-like methods can be manageable". Teachers in this setting were continuing to develop ways to ensure learning stories were manageable and time was a major factor for teachers.

Profile children lists

Each qualified permanent teacher had a list of profile book children. Teachers were responsible for ensuring that these children's profile books were kept up to date. There was an unwritten rule within the setting that each child should have one new learning story added to their profile book per month. A study by Loggenberg (2011) also found that teachers completed "one learning story per child, per month" (p. 1). This was contentious and teachers often talked about the pressures of keeping profile books up to date.

Sara: too many children, too little time yep…it just seems a lot in this busy setting where different children are here on different days and I think you shouldn't just feel constrained to your children.

Sara felt constrained to stick to her list of profile book children. The notion of the 'list' and sticking to the list was discussed on numerous occasions by teachers during staff meetings and individual interviews. Teachers were generally assigned between 12-15 children's profiles books for which they were responsible. This proved problematic when teachers were making decisions about what to record, some teachers made a conscious effort to record children's significant learning experiences regardless of whether the child was on their list. Whilst other teachers tended to write learning stories generally only for their profile book children.

When summarising what teachers wanted to look into further within the centre self-review Kate commented that teachers wanted "to write about all children not just their profile children". During one staff meeting the teaching team discussed the possibility of getting rid of the list and the potential implications of this.

> Kristina; you see so many learning stories happening in your role and then you get no they are not my children so you know
>
> Angelina; but if you took that (referring to the list) away then that would solve that problem
>
> Samantha; that's what I am kind of getting at I have made a commitment to write the stories that I see I don't care if they are not my children and it just seems sad if others aren't doing it 'cause that leaves me with a massive hole.

Teachers differing views of whether to stick to the list or not had implications for practice. As shown here Samantha had made the commitment to write meaningful learning stories for all children however, Kristina tended to stick to the list. By some teachers sticking to their lists Samantha felt disadvantaged and that some children may miss out on having their significant learning documented. Although Samantha had committed to writing stories for all children there was still a sense that there was not enough time to document all the learning that was happening within the setting.

This chapter has outlined some of the ways teachers were balancing the shift in assessment practices and negotiating with the learning community what assessment might look like within the setting. The differing assessment pressures and ways to write a learning story meant teachers continued to discuss and debate assessment practices within the setting. This was a complex process and whilst teachers articulated that for the most part assessment was strengths based, often what actually happened in practice varied. Teachers struggled to find a place for 'needs' within documented assessment and often children's learning goals were in teachers' heads, with most assessment being undocumented. Time was consistently discussed by teachers as a key factor in deciding whether significant learning would be documented. The next chapter takes a closer look at some of the ways teaching were working to get assessment 'right'.

Chapter 5 - Getting assessment 'right'

In this chapter, the notion of getting assessment 'right' is explored with reference to the key aspects of assessment teachers in this setting valued. Teachers were informed by key sources of early childhood literature to used ideas to guide their practice. Based on teachers' discussion of literature, this chapter is formed around teachers' understanding and use of learning dispositions within credit based assessments. The ways in which teachers plan to support children's developing learning pathways within assessment is also discussed. Multiple perspectives were important to this group of teachers and they were actively searching for ways to ensure that all members of the learning community had a say within assessment.

There was a range of differing perspectives of what it meant to get assessment right, although all teachers wanted to get it right and felt that assessing children's learning was a key part of their role and guided curriculum decision making. What it meant to get it 'right' differed from teacher to teacher, however teachers were all searching for the best way to assess and document children's learning. The complexities of learning stories and differing ways to write a story were often a topic of conversation for teachers. Teachers' understanding and use of learning stories was on the move and subject to change as new information was gained through professional conversations regarding assessment.

Learning stories - differences in writing styles

Teachers in this setting articulated that differences in assessment writing styles were acceptable and there was no one right way to write learning stories, however each teacher had their own view on what a learning story should look like and teachers seemed to be searching for the 'proper' way to write a learning story. Differences in writing styles often became the topic of discussion within staff meetings. Below Kate and Megan, senior members of the team, clarify with teachers how differences in writing styles are acceptable, within limits;

> Kate: now we all do our books differently which is great
>
> Megan: yeah which we are going to, everyone writes a learning story differently and that's just how it is
>
> Kate: exactly but with huge differences in story writing styles, does it make it visible for parents to know what the child achieved?

Although differences in writing styles where seen as acceptable teachers were still concerned with the 'proper' way to right a learning story, and part of this meant ensuring that the learning was made visible for parents. During two staff meetings, Kate questioned the "need to look at our learning stories, are we writing them properly?" Also questioning whether the team should "analyse our learning stories to see if we use the proper format" This suggests that there is one 'proper' way to write a learning story and that teachers should ensure that they are writing learning stories properly. Although variations in writing styles were deemed acceptable, there was a sense that learning stories must cover certain areas.

Teachers wanted to make sure that documented assessments were of a high standard and meaningful. Smith (2013b, p. 242) believes that "the use of appropriate assessment procedures is the linchpin of quality educational environments". Producing quality assessments was important to teachers, which suggests that teachers felt there is a right way to write a learning story. Samantha in particular believed it was important to get it right; "we get two hours every week doing this it is vital to get this right". Teachers wanted to ensure that their learning stories were fit for purpose and were looking into the ways they could continue to investigate assessment practices individually and collectively.

Getting it right – how can/do teachers make it work?

Teachers in this setting were motivated to make assessment work for themselves and indeed the wider learning community. It seemed as though teachers were in a way searching for the 'right' way to assessment children's learning and showed a willingness to continue developing assessment practices within the setting, part of this meant consulting literature.

Key literature to support assessment practices.
As teachers searched for ways to meaningfully assess children's learning they consulted key early childhood literature and support documents. The first recorded staff meeting discussed teachers' understandings of key literature surrounding assessment practices – *Te Whāriki, Kei Tua o te Pae*, *Te Whatu Pōkeka* and Education Review Office summaries (Education Review Office, 2007, 2013b, 2013c; Ministry of Education, 1996, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a, 2009b; Perkins, 2013). Each teacher had focused on one of these documents and shared the key messages relating to assessment practices. Of particular note was Kate's discussion of an Education Review Office summary (Education Review Office, 2013c). Kate even went as far as referring to the Education Review Office (ERO), "as the bible". Summarising the key points of "what actually ERO expects us to do when we do assessment", Kate read a long

excerpt which was discussed amongst the group. Teachers debated at length, the points raised by Kate and after much deliberation there was general agreement that the following summarised points from key documents, in particular ERO, constituted good assessment practice:

- Dispositional learning and skills are highlighted
- Documented assessment is credit based
- Teachers use assessment to understand children's learning and the plan to strengthen learning pathways
- Multiple perspectives (child, parents, family/whānau and other teachers) are evident
- Continuity of learning over time is evident

The discussion to follow will address each of these points in relation to teachers 'assessment perspectives and practices.

Dispositional learning and skills are highlighted

Many teachers discussed learning dispositions as being an important part of assessment. Teachers felt that highlighting learning dispositions within documented assessments was valuable. Discussion surrounding learning dispositions tended to focus on the five key learning dispositions connected to *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). Valuing learning dispositions is consistent with current views of learning within education and wider society. Keesing-Styles and Hedges (2007, p. 55) highlight "where certainty and facts were once synonymous with 'being knowledgeable', now it is attitudes and dispositions that many in both business and education see as the important prerequisites for effective participation in a diverse and changing world".

Within staff meetings teachers engaged in several robust discussions around how to highlight learning dispositions more within documented assessment. Many teachers felt that they could do a better job of highlighting and communicating children's learning dispositions for parents. Teachers talked about the benefits of learning dispositions and showing learning dispositions developing over time, but were also aware that often parents wanted to know about their child's knowledge and skills. Teachers wanted to highlight that learning dispositions were more valuable for children's ongoing learning. Sara in particular voiced that she felt teachers could do a better job of conveying the importance of focusing on learning dispositions rather than skills such as learning to count. Sara believed part of her job

was to almost re-educate parents as to the importance of learning dispositions and that teachers were not necessarily currently passing on to parents "the meaningfulness behind it we are not quite conveying it". Sara felt highlighting the benefits of early childhood education was important and part of this involved children's dispositions to learn as being enduring and applicable across a range of learning contexts. Elle also believed that learning dispositions were an important part of assessment, and much like Sara felt it was important to communicate children's key learning dispositions, and the importance of these to parents.

> Elle: using those dispositions and explaining to parents the importance of those dispositions and using those as a real key to show the actual learning that they are doing.

How teachers highlighted learning dispositions within documented assessment varied and whilst Sara and Elle put a lot of time and effort into highlighting key learning dispositions, for Kristina it was more about *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and she felt her learning stories did not connect to learning dispositions very often.

> Kristina: I link it to *Te Whāriki* mainly I don't tend to link it through to dispositions of the child I probably should do both.

Teachers highlighted learning dispositions within documented assessments to varying degrees. Each teacher focused on learning dispositions in different ways, some teachers wanted to be able to pick up a child's profile book and clearly see a learning disposition developing over time whilst other teachers felt that focusing on one disposition could mean that children were not being viewed in a holistic manner. Megan questioned whether focusing on one disposition could mean "missing all the more holistic side of it".

Learning dispositions were contentious within the setting and often became an area of debate. This is consistent with contemporary literature surrounding learning dispositions, some of which highlights the value of learning dispositions (Carr, 2001, 2009; Carr et al., 2015; Carr et al., 2010) whilst other sources propose they can be challenging to assess (Blaiklock, 2008, 2010; Nuttall, 2005; Zhang, 2015). Teachers in this setting continued to negotiate the meanings associated with learning dispositions and question if/how to practically connect to learning dispositions within documented assessment.

Documented assessment is credit based

Staff meetings and individual interviews showed that teachers were struggling to assess children's learning from what might be considered a purely credit based perspective. Samantha indicated that there had almost been a shift back toward children's negative attributes in a positive way.

> Samantha: we were so concerned about getting a positive outlook for that child that we weren't really thinking about their negative attributes, so we are still thinking about those in a positive way now.

Sara, Kristina, and Kate all discussed in some way children's needs that they were supporting and setting goals for within the programme and each teacher had a differing stance on what to include within documented assessments. Teachers were working out ways to try and ensure that documented assessment remained credit based, sometimes this meant some clever wording to keep things positive, for others this meant avoiding documenting the things children were working on.

In the last chapter, Sara highlighted her 'PC way' of talking about areas children were working on within learning stories. Sara was talking about areas children were working on but putting a positive spin on this so that the documented assessment appeared to be credit based. Careful wording and creative editing meant that Sara's documented assessment seemed credit based but the hidden messages often addressed areas children were developing that were not necessarily credit based.

Kristina on the other hand felt that if what was being worked on with a child was not positive then she did not record it at all within learning stories.

> Kristina: I have worked on a child who finds it hard to say goodbye and we have worked on that but it wasn't documented that this is your goals to say goodbye to mum.

This comment from Kristina shows that sometimes the tricky things that teachers are supporting children with were not documented within assessments. Teachers still supported children in these areas and spoke with parents and colleagues about children's goals however this did not always translate into documented assessments.

For Kate documented assessments were a combination of something children are passionate about and an area of need, "I really try to focus on something that is going so well and something that needs a little support". There was a balance for Kate, she liked to be able to celebrate children's strengths and interests. However her learning stories often clearly stated children's learning goals which were often based on what children were working on.

Although teachers indicated in staff meetings that they agreed assessment should be credit based as highlighted by key literature (Education Review Office, 2007, 2013b; Ministry of Education, 1996, 2004a, 2007b, 2009a, 2009b), teachers struggled to keep their documented assessment purely credit based. Each teacher had a differing way to make this work for them. Sometimes careful wording was required to keep learning stories positive, for others credit based assessment meant side-lining the areas children were working on within documented assessments, and at times it was a combination highlighting strengths as well as needs. Teachers were continuing to work out ways to keep documented assessment credit based.

Teachers use and understanding of children's learning pathways

All teachers discussed a range of ways they understood and planned to support children's learning, and there were often lengthy discussions during staff meetings about setting goals for children and whether teachers were putting 'what next's' or some sort of 'response' section into learning stories. Each teacher had a differing stance on whether planning to strengthen learning pathways meant including a specific goal within documented assessments. For some a specific goal was important and failing to include a goal meant that children's learning pathways were not evident across learning stories. Whilst other teachers felt that it was less specific and seeing strengths, interests and learning dispositions growing over time was more fluid. This section will use data from Megan and Sara, as examples of some of the ways teachers were trying to make sense of documenting and strengthening children's learning pathways.

Megan was trying to make sense of what strengthening children's learning might look like within documented assessments and felt learning dispositions were evident across her learning stories. However, she did not discuss next steps or make explicit connections between children's learning stories. For Megan the process of documenting learning over time was more of an evolving process and she could see learning dispositions developing over time and across children's experiences, some of which was evident in documented

assessment. However Megan was also aware that just because she could identify learning over time without it being explicitly pointed out, did not mean that others could.

> Megan: that's what we were noticing it may not be in the what next but you can really see an interest going through in the book but it is not written down and pointed out, is that because we have got a trained eye I don't know?

This raised questions and concerns for Megan, as she wondered whether parents could identify children's learning progress over time. After the results from the parent questionnaire came in highlighting that some parents were unaware of their child's learning goals Megan began to really think about and critique her notion of what made a good learning story. During a staff meeting Megan discusses with the teaching team some of her developing thoughts about what should be included in a learning story.

> Megan: I don't know if children have learning goals set, is that what we are looking at or are we looking at dispositions? Like reading a beautiful story you wrote (Kate) and you have really described his learning disposition in it. To me I would look at that and think right how can I extend on his disposition...and oh actually I see that same disposition in that story and how can I link that sort of thing together. Because I would look through my books and none of my children have clear learning goals set 'cause they don't but I can see where a disposition is working through.

Here Megan is elaborating on what makes a good learning story, as if she has a set of criteria to evaluate a story. For Megan a good learning story means including the child's learning dispositions in a way that flows within the story. Connections to learning dispositions and between learning dispositions are evident and incorporated within the main body of the learning story, however a clear specific learning goal is not necessary. Megan was cautious about including specific goals for children's learning within documented assessments and felt that as children's interests changed and developed so regularly planning a specific 'what next' was almost setting the child up to fail if their interest moved on.

Sara also felt that progress over time was not necessarily consequential, revisiting learning and showing connections between stories over vast periods of time was also part of it.

Sara: it doesn't have to be linear it could be one story links to the next story and the next story, well here we have got the baby thing... and it is way back here a year ago in the nursery.

Much like Megan, Sara did not value specifically setting goals within learning stories and felt that children's learning was much more 'chaotic' than setting and achieving goals.

Sara: goal setting is not really me, even though we are saying we will add these resources and this is your goal I think young children's learning is more chaotic than that.

Sara and Megan both discussed the complexities of showing learning over time and how children's interests and learning change and grow over time. However, Sara and Megan also worry that by not setting clear specific goals within learning stories that they may not be clearly communicating the next steps for children's learning. Megan questioned whether it is because teachers have a trained eye that they are able to notice learning over time, which suggests it may not be as easy for children and parents to identify learning over time. Teachers, in particular Megan and Sara, could see learning over time within documented assessments but the question remained could others? If the audience for assessment is children and families then surely assessment must be readable for children and families. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9) proposes that the main purpose of assessment is "to give useful information about children's learning and development to the adults providing the programme and to children and their families" and to inform future learning pathways. If key stakeholders cannot identify these future learning pathways within documented assessments teachers may need to revisit assessment so that parents and children can understand and contribute to the learning that is being documented by teachers. Teachers are putting all of this time and effort into highlighting children's learning over time however some parents commented it is not necessarily being communicated well within learning stories. An important feature of the learning story framework is the focus placed on multiple perspectives and ensuring a range of members of the learning community can have their say. For this to happen learning stories need to be reader friendly and understandable, avoiding educational jargon (Carr, 2001).

Multiple perspectives are evident

Multiple perspectives, or multi-voicing as some teachers referred to it, was important to teachers and all teachers to varying degrees felt including the child, parents and sometimes

wider family members as well as other teachers was a valuable part of assessment. When asked during the six individual interviews variations of the question 'when does assessment work well for you?' all teachers' responses connected to multiple perspectives in some way. Although each teacher commented on multi-voicing, individual teachers seemed to have differing understandings and priorities for whose voice they valued the most, as if there was a particular order of importance. Samantha and Kate felt that working as a team was at the top of the list whereas Megan, Kristina and Sara valued partnerships with parents the most. Elle did not seem to prioritise any particular perspectives as more important than others and felt in general multi-voicing was important.

> Samantha: assessment I think works best when it is the whole team working together when we can talk about a child...'cause everyone is on the same page and...when the parents are involved and the children are involved.

For Samantha it was about the team working together and being on the same page, and then involving parents and children in assessment processes. Kate also felt that all teachers working together and contributing to assessment was important as well as parents' contributions. Her response focused more on viewing children holistically rather than actively including children in assessing their own learning.

> Kate: the whole book all the teachers contributed all the voices were in it parents contributed and I could see the child holistically from the stories.

Megan believed first and foremost it was about "working more in partnerships with parents ...and getting the child more involved in their own learning as well and getting those voices really shining through and then coming together as a team and discussing it more within the team and getting different teachers' perspectives".

Kristina also valued talking with parents about children's learning and using this information during time off the floor to enrich documented assessment was valued.

> Kristina: talking to those parents and having that communication and having time off the floor to communicate with children.

For Sara verbal discussions and forming a really good relationship with parents was important but for her it was more about the day to day discussions with parents and less about utilising this information within documented assessments.

Teachers were working hard and using a range of strategies to try and include all members of the learning community within documented assessments. Teachers talked about a range of ways they were currently trying to include multiple perspectives within learning stories. Having informal conversations with parents and including the details of conversations within documented assessments was a common strategy used by teachers. Although this was discussed with mixed results and teachers said it often came down to the relationships they had with certain parents and whether teachers were organised enough to make notes that they could draw on later in non-contact times. Through informal conservations with parents and families Elle felt "you can start to build those connections and hopefully bring those back when it comes to learning stories".

Leaving space at the end of a learning story for parent comment was also discussed and teachers again felt they had mixed results with this strategy. Some parents it was felt consistently contributed, whilst other teachers felt that parents returned profile books with a blank space or were uncertain about teachers' expectations. When reviewing individual children's profile books in pairs Megan commented that "this will go home and the parents will read it so they will comment 'cause some parents you know will not even look at it so if you leave a comment it won't be filled in". One way Megan, due to her shorter work hours, made an real effort to try and ensure she could include the perspectives of parents was by making herself available during regular scheduled non-contact time. Megan felt that this worked for her and parents have really appreciated knowing there was a particular time they could call/email, however Megan acknowledged this strategy may not be desirable for all teachers.

Including the details of conversations with children into learning stories, in particular recording children's actual language in the story was also seen as a good idea. Some teachers felt that this was a good thing to do and made the learning story 'better quality'. Sara in particular noted that adding a child's voice to her learning stories was something she had been working on. Below Sara is discussing criteria for including the child's voice as if there is a recipe to getting it right, and indicates that she is not sure where the criteria comes from.

> Sara: I was thinking that when that criteria came out to include the child's actual
> spoken words. Which I must admit is a weak point of mine I don't actually write stuff
> down. But only as I was doing something today it made me think does this make it

better quality just because I have put something in that they have said. I don't know where that has come from but I have gotten the feeling that that is a good thing to do.

Sara's points above highlight some of the complexities of getting it right. Sara has made changes to her documented assessment, by aiming to add the child's actual words even though she is not sure where this came from and if it is even a good idea. As there is not a definitive format for how learning stories should be written and what should be included teachers in this setting continue to negotiate what a 'quality' documented assessment may look like.

Teachers felt it was also important to include the perspectives of other teachers and they valued time talking with other teachers. However, at times this was a struggle, due to differing work days/hours as well as busy times on the floor. The only opportunity for some teachers to talk with each other on a regular basis was at fortnightly staff meetings. Often during these meetings the majority of time was taken up on what might be considered 'housekeeping' issues and little time was left to discuss children's learning within the setting. Teachers found it challenging to find time together to actually discuss the children. Sara in particular really valued time to have professional conversations with other teachers "I think having meaningful discussions with other teachers is really valuable". A significant shift was made during the centre's self-review process and teachers began to prioritise time talking about children's learning within staff meetings.

Teachers continued to work on developing meaningful and manageable ways to include the voices of all members of the learning community within assessment. Many of these decisions came down to time and the quality of relationships between teachers and parents.

Relationships with parents

Teachers were regularly talking with parents about children's learning within the setting and found that these informal conversations with parents were an important aspect of assessment. Some teachers prioritised these informal conversations with parents and felt they were a major aspect of assessment within the setting.

Elle: assessment for me is working throughout whenever you are talking to parents

Sara: probably those day to day verbal discussion with parents, forming that really good relationship in the beginning so that we have got constant dialogue.

Elle and Sara valued conversations with parents and if time allowed some of the information gathered during these conversations was reflected in learning stories. Relationships and talking with parents about children's learning was important for teachers, although Megan felt that this was an area the setting needed to develop further. Megan believed it was important to work more closely with parents specifically in relation to assessment.

> *Megan: parents I think that is where we are really lacking is getting them on board and getting their input in where their child is at what learning they want us to help them with and really communicating where we think the need is and working with them .*

Parents within the setting also viewed communication with teachers as important, in particular parents' valued informal conversation with teachers at the beginning and end of the day. Providing an overview of parent questionnaire comments Kate noted that "what parents value the most was informal discussions with teachers that is what they want".

Teachers and parents valuing informal communication and assessments of children is consistent with a recent study which found that all teachers and parents interviewed "placed a high value on informal assessment and informal conversations that took place in the learning environment" (Mitchell et al., 2015b, p. 1). Relationships with others members of the learning community are of importance within early childhood contexts and are a guiding principle *within Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004b, p. 30) also "emphasises the role of relationships in the assessment process". Teacher in this setting valued relationships with parents and worked hard to establish and maintain relationships. At times relationships were fostered through documented learning stories which provided points for discussion. However most communication with parents happened on an informal basis and was not documented within assessments.

Sara in particular felt that utilising conversations with families within assessment is something she needed to continue working on, "that is probably something that I could work on really, yeah I probably don't link those conversations well enough due to time constraints and a sense of pressure a sense that my books are it just feels like a stress".

Teachers were continuing to look into ways to effectively build and maintain relationships with parents. Part of this relationship involved effectively communicating informally as well as through documented assessments. Getting this right put teachers in a stronger position to highlight children's learning and engage the learning community more effectively within assessment.

Continuity of learning over time is evident

"Rather than comparing individuals with a group, the focus should be on change over time" (Smith, 2013b, p. 259). Continuity is about showing the progress children are making overtime. *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004e, p. 3) states:

> "One way of looking at the assessment of continuity is as a record of the ongoing development of the *learning community*. Sometimes records of continuity will be from the viewpoint of the teacher, sometimes the child, and sometimes whānau and the wider community. It is not always possible to see the full picture of continuity because frequently only one perspective is documented"

Samantha felt that showing learning over time was valuable and used a particular set of guidelines to write learning stories, "having a framework does make continuity so you are honing in on those things so then you get consistency in your story". Kate also believed continuity was important and questioned whether parents could see connections between children's learning overtime.

> Kate: if we focus on a goal but we add other stories as well do we make it visible for parents to see continuity in that goal for example?

Kate was very goal orientated with her learning stories and setting and following up goals was important to her. A staff meeting also highlighted that for her continuity and showing strengths and interests developing over time for parents was important.

> Kate: focusing on continuity that when you pick up on a interest or a strength you follow it up...and you set goals for the child or what next and you make sure that you help him or her achieve it and you document it and you make it visible for parents.

Showing learning goals over time was important to Kate, although as discussed above feedback from the settings parent questionnaire indicated that some parents could not see learning goals within documented assessments. This was of concern for Kate, "I open his

book it was amazing… it linked together to that I could see that he started like this and he got that far and I really was proud for the team and for myself that I really captured it". In this instance Kate felt she had shown the child's progress over time, and that there was continuity between home and the early childhood settings. Kate was working hard to replicate these clear connections she felt were made within this child's profile book, and felt she had done a good job when everything connected together.

Working hard to get it right

Teachers were working hard to get assessment right within the setting and differing priorities meant teachers emphasised some aspects of assessment over others. The above points highlight what teachers viewed as important, based on assessment related documents. Excerpts from staff meetings and individual interviews have highlighted some of the ways teachers assessment practices were addressing or were at times at odds with these criteria. Teachers were continuing to consider and critique individually and collectively as a team what assessment should look like in this setting. There was an awareness of what parents wanted to see within documented assessment and teachers continued to work with members of the learning community to make meaning out of assessment.

As discussed in the literature review *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004c) highlights no one assessment format is right, and Ministry of Education and Education Review Office documentation generally avoids providing a 'recipe' for assessment within early childhood settings. It was challenging for teachers in this setting to negotiate assessment meanings and then work out practical and manageable ways to assess children's learning. As pointed out by Perkins (2013) another layer of complexity is added when little guidance has been provided by *Kei Tua o te Pae.* Teachers in this and many ECE services were unable to access the professional development surrounding *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a). The Education Review Office (2007) themselves pointed out that a shared understanding of the purposes and intent of assessment supported 'quality' assessment and that professional development and formal and informal time to discuss and reflect on children's learning was important.

Teachers in this setting valued time talking with each other about assessment practices, and more time to engage in professional discussions with other teachers was discussed by some. Sara in particular noted that more time to engage in professional discussions as a team would be helpful, "certainly I think we need to allocate more time as a

team because we are so busy...we need to prioritise time to have more discussions as a team". Teachers at times felt talking with each other about children's learning and assessment was a struggle. The only opportunity for some teachers to engage in professional discussions with each other on a regular basis was fortnightly staff meetings. Megan articulated that she found it challenging to find "time to actually discuss the children".

During the process of the centre self-review a significant shift was made and teachers began to prioritise talking about children's learning within staff meetings. Teachers also felt that going through individual children's profile books in pairs provided opportunities for discussion and debate, which were valuable to their professional practice. Time was one of the key barriers to assessment that kept coming up for teachers and there was a general feeling that there was just not enough time to achieve everything that teachers wanted to achieve in relation to assessing and documenting children's learning. It seemed as though it was a balancing act for teachers and they attempted to prioritise key parts of their role as a teacher.

> *"Sometimes there are all these pressures"*
> Sara: sometimes there are all these different pressures, I've got one in here about Annabelle 'cause mum is always like enquiring about her friendships so I keep writing about that almost giving mum evidence, look at all her friends.

Here Sara is stating quite clearly that the pressure she felt from a parent has meant that assessment was in a way about providing evidence. One aspect of developing a shared understanding of assessment is deciding the main audience for assessment and there are conflicting priorities in relation to assessment. Although the main audience for assessment appears to be children and families, documented assessments are frequently used as a basis for Education Review Office reports on individual settings. The Education Review Office whether intending to or not shapes early childhood teachers' thinking around assessment and there may be a tendency to document assessments which highlight what teachers believe ERO want to hear, as (Smith, 2013b, p. 274) states "assessment is commonly used to establish accountability".

Although early childhood education is not compulsory the sector does receive a certain amount of funding from the Government and is subject to a regulatory framework prescribed by the Minister of Education (Ministry of Education, 2008). As such the sector is subject to ERO reviews where each centre based early childhood service is subject to a

review around every three years (Education Review Office, 2013a). The Education Review Office is the government department which evaluates early childhood and school settings. One of the key questions ERO asks in ECE services is "How effective are assessment and planning processes in enabling teachers to notice, recognise and respond to the strengths, interests and capabilities of infants, toddlers and young children?" (Education Review Office, 2013a, p. 32). This question has the capacity to influence teachers' assessment practices, as teachers and settings are often concerned with getting a favourable ERO review. Teachers could become increasingly concerned with writing learning stories they feel may match ERO's current priorities. Teachers in this setting were discussing ERO regularly at staff meetings and as stated earlier Kate talked about ERO "as the bible". The management team within the centre often talked about ERO documents and how these could be used to guide assessment practices within the centre.

> Angelina: they (referring to ERO) will want to see evidence that there is evidence of linking they will look for that and that is a requirement from the Ministry so that is what we should be doing you should be able to see links in the books

> Megan: and also they (referring to ERO) will want to see links to the programme as well and links to individuals.

For Angelina, the centre supervisor and Megan, the head teacher, documented assessments should cover what ERO will be looking for. This perspective must in some way influence the choices teachers are making about what to record and include within documented assessments and added another level of pressure for some teachers.

The main ERO publication that the setting used as a basis for discussion within staff meeting was *Priorities for children's learning in early childhood services* (Education Review Office, 2013b). Within highly effective early childhood settings the Education Review Office (2013b, p. 8) found that;

- "Assessment information clearly showed children's progress over time.
- Assessment information was well analysed and used to inform curriculum decisions.
- Assessment information reflected children's diverse cultures, was highly individualised, and responsive to each child's age and interests.
- Assessment information showed continuity between learning at home and at the service"

Teachers discussed these points at the first recorded staff meeting and to varying degrees, as highlighted in the last chapter, they attempted to document learning stories which reflected these areas. There were a range of pressures involved with assessment in the setting, from selecting the audience for assessment to finding the time to fit it all in. Teachers grappled with how to make assessment work for all involved.

Reader friendly learning stories

If the main audience for assessment is children and families, it is important to ensure that learning stories are reader friendly. Attempting to make learning visible within learning stories in a way that made sense to children and parents was a key focus for teachers. Within a staff meeting Kate questioned how teachers were informing parents about children's learning within documented assessments asking "is it visible for parents?" For Megan the answer was a resounding "no, not for parents probably". Teachers were aware of writing readable learning stories that parents could easily make sense of however this did not always happen.

Kate felt that it was important for teachers to focus on making learning visible for parents; "we need to show that learning and we need to make it visible to parents" as results from the parent questionnaire had shown this was as area to continue working on. For Kate this meant "learning stories definitely need to be looked at are they just wasting time or are parents actually saying wow yes I understand now". This raised an interesting question for teachers to debate, if learning stories are not meaningful for one of the main audiences, then are they a waste of time? Teachers all felt that learning stories were indeed a meaningful form of assessment but that they needed to take a closer look at how they could ensure learning stories were readable and meaningful for parents and indeed children.

In addition to communicating with parents through documented assessments Elle and Kristina felt that informal communication with parents about what teachers had noticed was vital. Elle noted in her individual interview that learning stories were one way to communicate with parents and informal time talking with parents was just as, if not more important.

Elle: assessment for me is working throughout whenever you are talking to parents, because you are forever assessing families and where they are coming from and children and where they are at.

Informally talking with parents and getting parents' feedback was also seen as an important part of assessment for Kristina.

Kristina: I guess talking to those parents and having that communication… making sure that you drop everything when the parent comes in and letting them know how the day went praising the child… parents' voice is of course face to face daily and know that we can get something out to them and getting their feedback.

Kristina worked longer hours and saw the majority of parents at drop off and pick up times, so for her dropping everything and sharing a positive about each child's day was important. The informal verbal feedback from parents helped Kristina to get to know children better and use this information to plan future learning experiences. Sometimes Kristina drew on this information to support documented assessments.

Each teacher had a different way to communicate with parents. For some it was about ensuring that documented assessments made sense to parents, were reader friendly and highlighted children's learning. Other teachers focused more on informal conversations with parents and communicating key aspects of children's learning through talking with parents regularly. The one thing that teachers had in common is that they all wanted to communicate effectively with parents and were working hard to try and find ways to get it right. Teachers were continuing to look for ways to make learning stories happen more effectively for all involved.

Searching for way to 'get it right' – evaluating own and other teachers assessment practice

Figuring assessment out on your own can be tricky, in the excerpt below Sara highlights that it can be an individual process.

Sara: It is difficult you are left very much as an individual to do what you think is right. There's no, this is your job this is how we want you to do it, no real criteria you must identify the learning you must address it to the child it is all very open. I've got a life as well you know so making it manageable and achievable but trying to raise that overall level to get that balance is important.

Teachers in this setting wanted to get assessment right and were searching for how they could make it achievable and manageable. If there is a way to get it right and teachers could identify what the key ingredients of getting it right are, there was a sense they could work to emulate this. There was a real feeling that if someone would just tell teachers exactly what to do to make assessment work then teachers would happily do it and everything would be fine.

> Sara: what could I do to make the information more meaningful if it isn't meaningful for them already, I do think well I am the one that did the training I should be able to pass on some knowledge.

Sara wanted to ensure that her documented assessments were meaningful and felt a sense of pressure due to her teaching qualification to pass on some knowledge. This suggests that Sara wanted to get it right and share meaningful documented assessments with children and families. However, she felt this was an individual process and little guidance about how to get it right was provided. Teachers in the setting were working hard to make assessment work, for Sara this meant reflecting on her documented assessments and looking at some of the ways she could improve.

> Sara: I think I am getting better I will write a story and the format that I use is better and I am quite happy with it. I pick out the learning that is happening here...I probably was doing it a bit more embedded and I decided to split it up more to really spell it out... directing it to the child...and keeping it quite succinct with what is going on sort of the key learning that is happening here.

Sara is highlighting that for her a good assessment that she is happy with includes: directing the story to the child, spelling out the learning and keeping the story succinct. Sara and other teachers used their understandings of what makes a good learning story to evaluate their own and other teachers' learning stories.

> Sara: but it's not my idea of a story it is a bit of information maybe if you were interested...but it is not my idea of a quality story.

Sara was quite clear about what constituted good assessment practice in her eyes and though she was still searching for a definitive list of criteria she used her understanding of assessment to evaluate learning stories.

Although this section tells Sara's story, each teacher had their own ideas about what a learning story is and should include. Through professional conversations with others in the team the setting was working towards developing a collective understanding of what 'quality' assessment might look like in this setting. Teachers viewed professional discussion as important to this process. Sara and Samantha within their individual interviews commented that as a team they were still working at developing a shared understanding of what assessment meant within the over two room.

Samantha: we've never really, we don't have an over-riding, like there is all that assessment material out there but we don't have a position in my opinion of where we all stand

Sara: I definitely know there are some teachers I know I don't have a shared understanding with.

Understandings of assessment were on the move. As highlighted by Sara above new information and the process of the centre self-review meant teachers were consistently re-evaluating their learning story writing styles and adjusting the way learning stories were written. There was uncertainty about this and teachers often at times felt unsure about how they should write a learning story.

Andrea: because I talked to Megan and Elle about this today and apparently capturing moments like this are learning stories...because most of my books that I have taken over mainly have captured moments like this rather than the learning stories

Kristina: and that's the thing those are learning stories because they are, I don't know do we need to put that little what's next?

Andrea and Kristina are really questioning the core aspects of what a learning story is when they reviewed a child's profile book together, for Kristina this raised questions about whether the way she was writing stories was acceptable. Other teachers also queried their own and other teachers' writing styles when reviewing profile books in pairs. For Harriet and Megan the focus of discussion was on style and what to include.

Harriet: I like that Sara actually leaves space at the end of her stories... which is maybe a good thing, 'cause I only do it with some stories

Megan: and Sara knows that this will go home and the parents will read it so they will comment

Harriet: I don't always do an analysis and sometimes I wonder whether I should focus more on dispositions or whether you are setting them up for failure.

Adding a recognise and response section to the learning story or just focusing on learning dispositions within the story was a point for discussion for Harriet and Megan with both teachers articulating that they did this differently to the examples of Sara's learning stories that they were reviewing. Reviewing learning stories and having a chance to read other teachers' learning stories provided opportunities for teachers to voice their understanding of what makes a good learning story. Teachers tended to focus discussion on responding to children's learning and 'what next' steps.

Kate: but when you set a what next it is concrete that you set up that...when that activity is on offer I call you or I ask you to come and join us...and you can put it in the next one... an absolute link

Kristina: yeah it is useful, I know that is probably going to be the criticism of mine too, I know I do some what next's and do some linking to *Te Whāriki*...I will start looking at mine a bit more reflectively.

For Kate and Kristina the focus was on the response section and whether their own and other teachers' learning stories provided clear details regarding future learning pathways. These conversations in pairs raised a number of questions for teachers and it seemed there was not a general consensus about what a learning story should look like. Andrea and Kristina were searching for a definition of what a learning story is before they were willing to count up the learning stories within a profile book, and felt that a group discussion about what constitutes a learning story was required.

Teachers reflected individually and collectively on what constituted 'quality' assessment within the setting. These understandings continued to be shaped and re-shaped through conversations with each other. Assessment practices were often in a state of flux and on the move.

This chapter has illustrated how complex it is for teachers to make sense of assessment and work toward getting it 'right'. Each teacher had their own individual way to

write a learning story, and whilst this was seen as a strength of the learning story framework it was also a challenge. It was as though teachers were consistently second guessing their writing styles and questioning what should be included, especially when faced with alternative models their colleagues were using. Teachers were informed and used key literature to support their understandings of assessment. The learning story framework was purposefully designed to allow teachers the scope to negotiate assessment practices with the learning community, however this led to uncertainty.

Chapter 6 - Discussion

This chapter opens by revisiting key findings from this study, before discussing the possibilities for assessment practices in the future. Key findings included teachers in this setting, at times, struggling to shift assessment practices and assess children's learning from a purely credit based perspective. Often deficits crept into the ways teachers talked about children's learning and teachers found it challenging to place 'needs' within documented assessments. Balancing conflicting views of assessment was complex and teachers were working hard to try and ensure assessment was authentic. Getting assessment 'right' was important for teachers and they put a lot of time and effort into making assessment manageable and meaningful. Teachers were informed and used key early childhood literature to support their understandings and assessment practices. Professional discussions and time to talk about assessment and negotiate assessment meanings was valued by teachers. Developing a shared understanding was not easy and there was a sense teachers were searching for the one 'right' way to assess children's learning. Sociocultural, formative assessment in the form of learning stories is complex and key literature highlights that each setting should assess children's learning according to the priorities of the learning community (Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a). Teachers in this setting faced a number of issues and challenges as they, at times, struggled to make sense of assessment.

This chapter will investigate further the complexities of early childhood assessment in relation to shifting practice and getting it right. Throughout the chapter a range of implications for teachers, the Ministry of Education, Education Review Office, initial teacher education and induction and mentoring will be presented. Learning stories are an innovative approach to assessment however they are also complex and require professional approaches. According to Smith (2013b, p. 241) "assessment is one of the most demanding tasks faced by a teacher at any level of the education system. It requires skill, knowledge, sensitivity, understanding, willingness to consult colleagues and the community, commitment to spending time on assessment within programmes, and awareness of the uses and consequences of assessment". Guided by Smith's thoughts on assessment the following points will be discussed in this chapter:

- Assessment is a demanding task within ECE
- Teachers need skills, knowledge, sensitivity, understanding and awareness of the uses and consequences of assessment

- Teachers also need to be willing to consult colleagues, the community and commit to spending time on assessment

Keeping this level of complexity within early childhood assessment is important for the sector to continue making gains in the way children's learning is assessed. Keeping assessment complex is multifaceted and involves a strong commitment from first and foremost teachers themselves, but also within the infrastructure of the sector. The government, early childhood policy, support agencies, initial teacher education and induction and mentoring programmes all have a role to play in supporting teachers to be up to the task of understanding and using complex models of assessment. Formative forms of assessment such as learning stories, take time and effort to understand and make work on a daily basis when assessing children's learning.

How do we maintain the ability to keep assessment complex?

To keep the complexity of assessment within early childhood education requires commitment from teachers as well as at a wider policy level. The Aotearoa New Zealand Government has previously supported professional development to encourage teachers' assessment of children's learning and put a vast amount of funding into the development and implementation of *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a). A further commitment could help to support teachers as they work hard to keep assessment complex. It also requires all involved to understand that assessment is complex, and be able to manage uncertainty and ambiguity within early childhood assessment. This understanding means becoming comfortable with the fact there is no one right way to assess children's learning and it is okay for teachers to feel conflicted as they negotiate assessment meanings with the learning community. The process of making meaning out of assessment is in itself a rich site to discover and discuss the complexities of assessment.

Learning stories are by no means the only way to assess children's learning within early childhood settings and many other observations and assessment methods are available. Traditionally norm referenced forms of assessment have been used to compare children against 'normal' development (Zhang, 2015). Norm referenced and standardised testing h$as however long been criticised for being mono-cultural and "decontextualized from children's natural, everyday routines" (Bagnato, 2007, p. 19). Whilst norm referenced forms of assessment have been long since replaced in the early childhood sector by learning stories some still question learning stories as the main form of assessment and debate the

effectiveness of only using one form of assessment. Learning stories heralded a complex approach to assessment which recognises the influence of children's social and cultural contexts and the relationships within these as important to children's learning experiences. The question is how can the early childhood sector as a whole keep the complexity of assessment intact against the current backdrop of early childhood education? The recent report of the Advisory Group on early learning (Ministry of Education, 2015c, p. 8) summarises the significant features to consider:

- "some early years settings are less effective than others
- re-engagement with *Te Whāriki* is needed
- local and cultural knowledge are crucial to implementing *Te Whāriki*
- the workforce is not fully qualified
- an uneven qualifications base risks undermining investment
- transition to school can threaten continuity"

Although the context for assessment has changed and moved forward following the introduction of *Te Whāriki* and *Kei Tua o te Pae*, there is still much to do (Smith, 2015). Smith (2015, p. 93) believes "in a period of fiscal restraint and conservative policies we can only hope to retain the positive aspects of our system, and make further progress". The government's position seems relatively clear and whilst the universal 20 hours policy remains, current government policy aims funding toward achieving the goal of 98% participation with targeted funding aimed at increasing the participation of Māori, Pasifika and low socioeconomic status families (Ministry of Education, 2012). Currently funding within ECE is focused on increasing participation, refocusing some of this funding toward professional development could support the sector continuing to make gains in terms of curriculum implementation and assessment. There are also growing fears within the sector that the government is prioritising static academic literacy and numeracy skills, which could have dire effects on the early childhood sector, long aware of the 'push down' effect (Smith, 2015).

There is a veneer of efficiency when assessing academic knowledge. Knowledge and skills are seen as relatively easy to assess through an array of developmental style checklists already created. Assessment becomes a matter of ticking the boxes, little skill or thought is generally required from teachers. In comparison learning stories and learning dispositions are viewed as complex and time consuming, requiring as Smith (2012) points out a depth of

skills and knowledge. Complicated approaches to assessment that deal with complexity means rethinking assessment goals. If we are serious about learning dispositions supporting lifelong learning this requires a combination of resources, professional development/support and inclination. Teachers in this setting were certainly putting a lot of time and effort into developing a greater understanding of assessment and using this understanding to inform everyday assessment decision making.

Assessment is a demanding task

The intention of *Kei Tua o te Pae* was to provide a resource teachers and members of the learning community can engage with to support the creation of rich, complex documented assessments which are meaningful for children in their unique settings. *Kei Tua o te Pae* is explicit in stating "recognising complexity also means viewing assessment as something much more complex than assigning marks or ticking boxes. No one format is "right", but the *Te Whāriki* principles provide four evaluative criteria" (Ministry of Education, 2004a, p. 19). *Kei Tua o te Pae* provides an open framework encouraging learning communities to find their own way to assess, however everything points to learning stories as the preferred form of assessment. So although there is no one "right" format learning stories are inherently expected and producing meaningful learning stories is not without challenges. Perkins (2013) in particular believes that lack of information about narratives/learning stories within *Kei Tua o te Pae* means that it is a guessing game for some teachers and settings who may struggle to negotiate meaning. Assessment is a demanding task and the lack of clarity surrounding how to write a learning story could make it harder for some teachers to translate assessment into practice.

As I have suggested earlier, implicitly or at times explicitly the majority of Education Review Office and Ministry of Education documentation encourages the use of learning stories (Carr et al., 2015; Education Review Office, 2007, 2013b, 2013c, 2015a; Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a). The introductory book of *Kei Tua o te Pae* however does not mention learning stories at all and the term narrative assessment is only used on the last page (Ministry of Education, 2004a). As *Kei Tua o te Pae* is the main support document for teachers assessment practice it seems strange that the preferred form of assessment is not explicitly discussed within the introductory book. The introductory booklet does state that:

The books are designed as a professional development resource to enable learning communities to discuss assessment issues in general, both in terms of *Te Whāriki* and in terms of their own specific settings. They introduce principles that will help learning communities develop their own assessments of children's learning.

(Ministry of Education, 2004a, p. 2)

Learning stories were being used in the sector prior to the introduction of *Kei Tua o te Pae* with Mitchell (2008) reporting that in 2007, two years prior to the publication of *Kei Tua o te Pae*, 94% of teachers had used learning stories. Although other studies around the time highlighted that teachers were using learning stories, many teachers did not have a strong understanding of the assessment method or what constituted 'quality' assessment practices (Education Review Office, 2007; Stuart, Aitken, Gould, & Meade, 2008). Clearer guidance within *Kei Tua o te Pae* could have supported teachers' understanding and use of learning stories. Perkins (2013) goes as far to say that "without clearer guidance in *Kei Tua o te Pae*, teachers are disadvantaged as they try to develop their own quality approaches to assessment and may well take a surface level approach to understanding" (p. 3). Teachers in this study were continuing to develop their own approach to assessment relative to the setting. Clearer guidance from key documents may have supported teachers.

No blueprint for assessment

As discussed the Ministry of Education and key support documents such as *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a) are clear in not providing a blueprint for assessment. Each individual setting is to negotiate with the learning community assessment practices to suit the particular setting. Teachers within this setting were searching for a way to get assessment right and if someone/something could just clarify exactly what teachers needed to do then the teachers in this setting would happily do it. Teachers were using key Ministry of Education and Education Review Office resources and documents to guide assessment practices, and continued to search for the best way to assess children's learning.

Without a definitive description of how a learning story should be written teachers are left somewhat to their own devices as they try to make sense of the assessment framework. Much time and effort and research has gone into the development of the learning story framework and learning stories are acclaimed as an innovative approach to assessment both nationally and internationally (Dunn, 2004; Dunphy, 2010; Hatherly, 2006; Hatherly &

Sands, 2002; Nyland & Alfayez, 2012; Reisman, 2011; Smith, 2013b; Whyte, 2010), however the learning story framework is not without critique and concerns have been raised about the effectiveness of learning stories (Blaiklock, 2008, 2010, 2013a; Perkins, 2013; Zhang, 2015).

One of the key criticisms is surrounding the lack of clarity about how to write a learning story and what teachers should be looking for when assessing children's learning (Blaiklock, 2008; Perkins, 2013; Zhang, 2015). Although *Kei Tua o te Pae* discusses the processes of noticing, recognising and responding frequently within the booklets there "was no discussion about "noticing" and what it could look like in practice" (Perkins, 2013, p. 4). As Perkins (2013) suggests teachers are left somewhat disadvantaged by the lack of discussion about how to actually write a learning story within *Kei Tua o te Pae*. The examples within the booklets are varied and show a variety of differing writing styles and this may contribute to teachers' confusion about what to pay attention to. Perkins (2013, pp. 6-7) believes "although *Kei Tua o te Pae* was intended to inform professional discussions about assessment, much of the information required for a practical application of those discussions was absent and relied on additional information gathered by individual teachers and PD facilitators". Given the sociocultural nature of the learning story framework it could be assumed that details surrounding how to write a learning may have been purposefully left fuzzy to provide opportunities for individual settings to negotiate meaningful assessments within their own unique learning community.

Learning stories are open and provide the space for teachers to work with the learning community to negotiate assessment meanings in line with *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). Shifting to complex assessment methods has been a cause for debate. This debate was no more evident than in the discussions between Smith (2013a) and Blaiklock (2013b) who both took a differing standpoint on the value and purpose of *Te Whāriki* and assessment methods used to support the implementation of the curriculum. Blaiklock (2013b) proposes that *Te Whāriki* and learning stories fail to provide adequate information regarding children's content knowledge and advocates for differing forms of assessment to be considered. Blaiklock (2010) discussed a form of assessment he calls learning notes which do not focus on learning dispositions and are suggested as a manageable alternative to learning stories. Zhang (2015, p. 72) also suggests the "dilemma is that while early childhood education professionals are aware that the learning stories approach has some inadequacies and

limitations they are reluctant to or perhaps feel they will not be supported to include or use other methods of assessment". Teachers in this setting were discussing the challenges they faced using learning stories, generally however teachers valued the learning story approach and were working hard to make learning stories work in their setting. Smith (2013) believes further research can only be a good thing in supporting understanding about the value of learning stories, she feels assessment is on the right track and complexity must be maintained.

To keep learning stories complex a stronger understanding of the theoretical grounding and greater awareness of how this relates to assessment practices could have supported teachers within this setting. Learning stories are based largely on sociocultural perspectives of learning and whilst book 2 of *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004b) provides a summary of aspects of sociocultural theory relating to the principles of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) this may not provide enough of a theoretical grounding as teachers struggle to make sense of learning stories as a sociocultural, formative form of assessment. Teachers within this study as well as teachers in many New Zealand early childhood settings, completed qualifications at a time when developmental perspectives of learning dominated initial teacher providers (Hill, 2011). Therefore the time and support for teachers within the sector to develop a clear understanding of the implications of sociocultural theory in relation to curriculum and assessment may have been limited. Research after the introduction of *Kei Tua o te Pae* showed that many teachers did not have a good understanding of what constituted a good learning story (Education Review Office, 2007; Stuart et al., 2008) and more recent Education Review Office reports highlight that not much has changed and some teachers still have a limited understanding of the purpose of and use of learning stories (Education Review Office, 2013b, 2013c). Another layer of complexity is added to this when considering children's dispositions to learn.

The complexities of learning dispositions

In addition to understanding sociocultural, formative forms of assessment within the learning story framework learning dispositions are highlighted. Teachers are asked to pay attention to and highlight children's learning dispositions. Teachers in this setting regularly discussed learning dispositions and how these were or were not evident within documented assessments. *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p. 7) explicitly highlights the expected connections to learning dispositions stating:

"Learning stories integrate learning dispositions into a story framework and include an analysis of the learning. They frequently include Possible pathways or What next? suggestions. In the original research with teachers, five dispositions-in-action followed a story sequence: taking an interest; being involved; persisting with difficulty, challenge, and uncertainty; expressing a point of view or feeling; and taking responsibility".

Although *Kei Tua o te Pae* suggests five dispositions in action, when providing an overview of the definitions of learning dispositions and implications for early childhood practice Katz (1993) has noted that "usage of the term disposition is ambiguous and inconsistent" (p. 16). Carr and Claxton (2002, p. 10) also note that "the word 'disposition' is imprecise". If as suggested here, definitions of learning dispositions are ambiguous, inconsistent and imprecise, this adds a large amount of complexity for teachers as they attempt to make sense of learning dispositions within the context of early childhood assessment.

With challenges defining the term learning dispositions, deciding on key learning dispositions and connecting these to the strands of *Te Whāriki* may also be seen as problematic (Blaiklock, 2008). Coffield (2002) proposes that a case could be made to assess a number of differing learning dispositions, however five key learning dispositions are generally associated with the strands of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). Blaiklock (2013a) in particular believes there is no rational for linking certain behaviours to dispositions, and questions why learning stories tend to focus on five learning dispositions. Carr (2001, p. 46) acknowledges "the process of assessing dispositions as one of assessing complex and elusive outcomes" (p. 46). As there is a lack of clarity about what dispositions are attempts to assess them, are according, to Blaiklock (2013a), seen as challenging and this could lead to important knowledge and skills not being assessed. Due to the holistic nature of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) it has also been suggested that the key learning dispositions connected to the strands may cross over and connect with other strands and indeed principles also (Blaiklock, 2008). Allal (2002) suggests that making connections between dispositions and behaviours needs to be based on more research and that it remains relatively unknown "as to how such constructs are manifested for different children in different contexts" (p . 52). Sadler (2007, p. 46) also proposes that "although it may make intuitive sense to speak of a learning disposition as if it were an enduring characteristic of a learner, in practice dispositions are highly and probably inevitably situational".

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If, as the literature presented here suggests, the term learning disposition and application of learning dispositions in the context of learning stories is problematic, situational and requires further research, it must certainly be a struggle for teachers to use learning dispositions effectively within documented assessments. It could be fair to say that teachers may be searching for support when developing an in depth understanding of learning dispositions. Key agencies, the Ministry of Education and Education Review Office discuss learning dispositions at times within resources, however only at what could be considered a surface level (Education Review Office, 2007, 2013b, 2013c; Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a). Lack of discussion and debate about the strengths and challenges of learning dispositions within key resources may mean that teachers are picking up and using learning dispositions to assess children's learning without a clear knowledge, understanding and critique of learning dispositions relative to their early childhood context. Katz (1993, p. 16) proposes that the "inclusion of dispositions as goals requires determination of which dispositions to include and how their manifestation can be assessed". With a potential lack of understanding regarding learning dispositions and a predetermined set of learning dispositions already connected to the strands of *Te Whāriki* it may be unlikely for teachers to engage in critical discussion and search for alternative learning dispositions. Teachers in this setting certainly tended to stick to the five key learning dispositions connected to the strands of *Te Whāriki.* This is much like the teachers in the Anthony et al. (2015) research study, who were also keen to foreground learning dispositions within learning stories and tended to stick to the five key learning dispositions presented as connecting to *Te Whāriki*. Anthony et al. (2015) also found that of the 66 learning stories sampled, the majority focused on the five key learning dispositions connected to *Te Whāriki*. Of the 167 mentions of learning dispositions, there were only 14 instances where teachers suggested alternative learning dispositions. This begs the question, have these five learning dispositions become taken for granted within assessment practice? Do teachers now have blinkers on as they highlight children's learning dispositions? Teachers in this setting certainly tended to talk about learning dispositions mainly in relation to the five key learning dispositions.

In order for connections to learning dispositions to be credible teachers need to be informed practitioners who can justify why they came to certain understandings regarding learning dispositions, at the same time recognising that each stakeholder will see dispositions differently. Teachers need to ensure they are viewed as a trustworthy source and for this to

happen connections to learning dispositions which have been fore grounded should be logical and easily identifiable (Podmore & Carr, 1999, December). Carr (2001) refers to this as "keeping the data transparent" (p. 183) which means ensuring that other teachers, children, parents and families/whānau are able to easily read and understand the learning story and "find alternative readings if they want" (p. 183). This study has highlighted that teachers wanted to ensure that learning stories could be easily understood by children, parents and others teachers and that multiple perspectives were valued. In reality however it was not as easy as it seems for teachers to document children's learning in meaningful and manageable ways and paying attention to learning dispositions or not was an area of contention. Some teachers felt it was part of their job to make sure that learning dispositions were clearly discussed whilst others took a more holistic approach to discussing children's learning. Parents tended to want to know more about their child's learning in relation to skills and specific domains of learning, meaning some teachers wrote learning stories to give parents evidence of the learning that was occurring. There was a delicate balance of how to discuss children's learning in a way that will meet the needs of all members of the learning community. These differing audiences for assessment changed how teachers in this setting pitched learning stories.

Teachers need skills, knowledge, sensitivity, understanding and awareness of the uses and consequences of assessment

A teacher acquiring the skills, knowledge, sensitivity and understanding to effectively enact assessment in meaningful and manageable ways is fourfold involving; committed teachers, assessment support through policy and professional development, strong initial teacher education and adequate induction and mentoring programmes. Much of the responsibility lies with teachers themselves being committed to assessment practices, and this point will be addressed later in the chapter. Key support and guidance agencies of the Ministry of Education and ERO also have a role to play in supporting teachers to develop necessary skills, knowledge, sensitivity and understanding. Smith (2013b, p. 259) believes "teachers also need time, support and an appropriate working context, as well as skills and knowledge, to carry out their important assessment role". Teachers in this setting were experienced teachers who engaged in a number of professional discussions about children's learning and assessment. However, they were still wondering about the assessment procedures being used and how effective they were. Questions around the structure and content of learning stories often came up for teachers. The setting missed the opportunity to participate in the

professional development surrounding *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a) and widespread access to professional development, such as that provided when *Kei Tua o Te Pae* was introduced, could provide opportunities for teachers to continue developing and reflecting upon the purpose and use of assessment relative to their setting.

Professional development opportunities and resources

A study by Fleer and Richardson (2004) found that when shifting practice from developmental notions of assessment to sociocultural perspectives it took twelve months of active professional development before teachers were comfortable observing, assessing and planning from a sociocultural perspective. The introduction of *Kei Tua o te Pae* was accompanied by professional development opportunities aimed at supporting existing teachers and centres to engage in professional conversations around the practical aspects of using learning stories within their respective settings (Perkins, 2013). The professional development surrounding *Kei Tua o te Pae* was however limited and although the booklets and professional development was provided by the Ministry of Education free of charge, not all early childhood services had the opportunity to participate in the professional development, which ceased in 2009 (Perkins, 2013). A change in government in 2008 set about the removal of what was described by the incoming government as a "blowout" in spending on ECE (Smith, 2015). Which meant, amongst other changes, "axing professional development programmes" (Smith, 2015, p. 90) one of which was the support provided to implement *Kei Tua o te Pae*. This was the last large scale Ministry of Education funded professional development programme to support teachers as they attempt to negotiate the complexities of assessment.

In relation to assessment there is now very little if any Ministry of Education funded professional development available within early childhood education. When searching for professional development specific to assessment in early childhood contexts on the Ministry of Education website no search results were identified (Ministry of Education, 2015d). If there is Ministry of Education support available for teachers in early childhood education it was certainly hard to find. The website did however list a range of other early childhood sector organizations, some of which provided professional development for early childhood services for a fee. The Education Gazette does advertise a number of professional development opportunities available for teachers, however these are also generally at a fee (Ministry of Education, 2015a).

Changes to funding within early childhood education have affected the amount of professional development available for early childhood teachers through the Ministry of Education (Smith, 2015). The Ministry of Education does however continue to work with individual settings who have been identified as "requires further development" or "not well placed" (Education Review Office, 2013, p. 47) within an Education Review Office review. The Ministry of Education steps in to provide additional support and guidance, sometimes in the form of professional development, when an early childhood setting has been identified as not performing well. This is an example of targeted rather than universal access to support and guidance; an argument could be made that widespread access to professional development for all early childhood settings may support all centres to be well placed. Teachers in this setting articulated they would like further opportunities to discuss assessment practices and widespread access to professional development could have supported this.

In terms of curriculum and assessment the Ministry of Education states they are responsible for ensuring that support is provided for teachers by "providing curriculum statements and achievement standards, resources to support teaching, learning and assessment and professional leadership and providing professional development programmes" (Ministry of Education, 2015d, p. 8). This statement shows that part of the role of the Ministry of Education is to ensure teachers have resources to support assessment and professional development programmes are provided. Presently the Ministry of Education (2015b, p. 25) is "reviewing the current approach to Professional Learning and Development", however no wide reaching professional development has been made available to support teachers understanding and use of assessment practices. There are very little opportunities for teachers to engage in professional development, unless the service makes a commitment to pay for professional development. In a recent literature scan for the Ministry of Education (Carr et al., 2015) the writers have called for "a reinstatement of professional development in assessment for all teachers and in all early childhood settings" (p. 54).

Changes to funding and the rise in for profit early childhood services (Smith, 2015) may mean that services are often operating on very tight margins and the amount available to fund professional development could be limited. Smith (2015, p. 89) believes the rise in privately owned ECE services has been subject to criticism as "private centres employ staff with poorer salaries and working conditions". Access to professional development is connected to working conditions and it is suggested that the large number of private ECE

services are less likely to fund professional development opportunities as it could interfere with profit margins (May, 2014).

Even if there was to be a shift and renewed focus on universally funded assessment professional development it is important to consider the effectiveness of the support provided. Perkins (2013), who was a facilitator and co-director for one of the national contracts to support the implement of *Kei Tua o te Pae,* has been critical of the exemplars themselves and the variability of the professional development. McNaughton (2011, p. 158) believes "when implementing professional learning and development around strategies of formative assessment, facilitators must recognise that teaching and assessment practice does not occur in a vacuum". This suggests that professional development providers must not lose site of the complexities of day to day teaching within early childhood settings and ensure this is taken into account when working with teachers. Any support, advice and guidance provided must be considered to be manageable and applicable to individual early childhood settings. This is supported by the Assessment Reform Group (2008) Analysis and Review of Innovations in Assessment (ARIA) project who provided two main conclusions: "initiatives in assessment do not always take full account of all of the key dimensions of the change process or the needs of all the key communities involved" (p. 1); and "a set of principles and standards is needed to guide the development of effective assessment practice" (p. 2).

Whilst funding and widespread support for assessment professional development is desirable any such initiatives must take into account the needs of the early childhood community and recognise that change takes time and commitment. Professional development programmes can support teachers working within the sector and it is also important to consider how beginning teachers are being supported to understand the complexities of assessment.

Implications for initial teacher education training

If professional development within early childhood education is limited and variable, and teachers within the sector are continuing to negotiate what assessment means, the weight of ensuring beginning early childhood teachers are up to the task of assessing children's learning in meaningful ways falls on initial teacher education (ITE) . Preparing student teachers well is a key part of supporting teachers to transition into the profession with the knowledge and skills necessary to become effective teachers. Noticing, recognising, responding to, documenting and revisiting children's learning is a large part of a teacher's

role. It is therefore imperative that teachers leave training providers with a strong knowledge of how to assess and support children's learning. The Ministry of Education (2015b, p. 25) have a stake in this and indicated within their four year plan that strengthening initial teachers' education is a priority, in the hope that "investing in the profession will raise the quality of teaching and leadership and provide opportunities to improve educational outcomes". This setting had made a commitment to continue employing qualified teachers and aimed to ensure all teachers working within the setting were qualified. Raising the level of support provided within ITEs in relation to assessment could support overall understanding within the sector.

Providing strong practical support as teachers begin to develop an understanding of the purpose of assessment, and the practical ways teachers can make assessment work must be planned as a key part of initial teachers' training. Initial training providers range in terms of the qualifications and modes of study offered to students, from face to face to distance and online models of early childhood education qualifications. Although ITE providers differ in modes and programmes they are all required to ensure that teachers in training address the *Graduating Teachers Standards* prior to gaining the relevant qualification (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2015a). As such ITEs are subject to external panel reviews and programmes must be approved by the Education Council and New Zealand Qualifications Authority (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2015a; New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2015). In the recent Advisory group report the group "looked at the effectiveness of current ITE, and were struck by the lack of evidence for a positive relationship between it and curriculum implementation in early childhood education" (Ministry of Education, 2015c, p. 12). As assessing children's learning is a large component of curriculum implementation it is really important that ITEs get this right and build strong practical links to assessment and curriculum into programmes.

Induction and mentoring
After completing a recognised early childhood education qualification the majority of beginning teachers begin to engage in the teacher registration process, and many of the teachers in this setting were registered teachers. As part of this provisionally registered teachers "have the guidance of a mentor teacher who is an experienced fully certified colleague, trained to guide and support and give constructive feedback" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2015b). However this support is dependent on the skills and commitment of the mentor teacher and mentoring can be a tough task. The Education Council

has acknowledged that "an induction and mentoring programme may look different from one setting to another" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2015b). The one common element is that all early childhood teachers are required to work toward and address all aspects of the *Practising Teacher Criteria* before being awarded full registration.

The Practising Teacher Criteria, in relation to assessment require teachers:

11. analyse and appropriately use assessment information, which has been gathered formally and informally

i. analyse assessment information to identify progress and ongoing learning needs of ākonga

ii. use assessment information to give regular and ongoing feedback to guide and support further learning

iii. analyse assessment information to reflect on and evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching

iv. communicate assessment and achievement information to relevant members of the learning community

v. foster involvement of whānau in the collection and use of information about the learning of ākonga

(Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2015b)

There are a number of factors involved here, which are heavily reliant on the assessment skills and abilities of the mentor teacher. If, as a variety of ERO reports are suggesting, assessment practice varies (Education Review Office, 2007, 2013b, 2013c) this must surely affect the support provided to provisionally registered teachers. Provisionally registered teachers in settings with highly effective assessment practices will likely receive strong support and guidance, whereas teachers working in settings with less developed assessment practices are likely to be receiving less support. Ultimately the mentor teachers makes the call as to whether the provisionally registered teacher is achieving all aspects of the registered teacher criteria and this is a matter of perspective, strong assessment practices may lead to higher expectations.

Pathways to the future: Ngā huarahi arataki 2002-2012 (Ministry of Education, 2002) heralded what some have described as a golden era of early childhood education which saw steps put in place to provide robust infrastructure for delivering high quality early childhood education (May, 2014). Part of the plan included increased attention and funding for induction and mentoring programmes. The rescinding of key aspects of the strategic plan has meant projected gains from key aspects of it were never fully realised. The Advisory group of early learning (Ministry of Education, 2015c, p. 7) calls for "all early childhood and care services to make available teacher enquiry time equivalent to two hours non-contact time per provisionally registered teachers per week, to support inquiry-based induction and mentoring". Additional time for provisionally registered teachers to critically reflect on practice with the support of skilled mentor teachers is one way to support teachers understanding and use of assessment. Shifting practice takes time and a commitment from many different facets of early childhood education.

Shifting practice

Increasingly teachers are faced with additional pressures as to what to foreground within documented assessments. With the current government placing a strong emphasis on raising literacy and numeracy standards there is fear amongst the sector that this may push down into early childhood contexts and the value of learning dispositions may be lost in the process (Keesing-Styles & Hedges, 2007). Although the thought of compartmentalising children's learning into subject knowledge is against the holistic nature of *Te Whāriki* some authors suggest that highlighting learning dispositions over domain knowledge is the biggest shortcoming of the learning story framework (Anthony et al., 2015; Blaiklock, 2013a; Nuttall, 2005). Blaiklock (2013b, p. 26) believes "that demands have been placed on teachers to assess learning dispositions when this field of inquiry is still so poorly understood, and when researchers in this area cannot adequately define what it is they want teachers to assess". With potential re-engagement and changes to *Te Whāriki* teachers may yet again need to re-negotiate what learning is valued, what assessment of that learning means, and the theoretical perspectives underpinning preferred assessment methods. Traditionally developmental theory and summative forms of assessment have been common practice within education (Fleer, 2010). Sociocultural formative assessments, such as learning stories are complex and require discussion of learning in action, with ideas about possible future pathways (Carr, 2009). Teachers in this setting were developing their understanding of

learning and assessment from a sociocultural perspective and further changes to assessment and/or a move back toward more summative forms of assessment could cause further challenges.

Theoretically muddled

Developmental perspectives were, at times, influencing the things teachers within the setting paid attention to. Teachers often discussed individuals within a group context and sometimes aimed to fill the gaps of what children could not yet do in relation to 'typical' development. Teachers within this setting debated at length the benefits and limitations of group versus individual learning. From a developmental perspective each child is seen as an individual and standards of typical development are often used to assess whether children are developing in a 'typical' fashion (Agbenyega, 2009).   The general consensus from teachers in this setting was that group learning was important and this should be recorded within learning stories, however it was important to ensure that each child was discussed individually and had individualised recognise and response sections added to group stories. This could point to a lack of understanding about sociocultural views of assessment, which propose that what children can do within the context of relationships with others is important (Fleer, 2010). From this perspective a sociocultural approach to assessment would always look at the collective and what children can do together rather than discussing children's learning on an individual basis. Preferring the term cultural-historical to sociocultural, Fleer (2010, p. 204) proposes that for teachers to make the shift in thinking toward cultural-historical models requires the adoption of this theoretical position "applied consistently across assessment practices, philosophical views on pedagogy (and therefore teacher-child interactions) and views on development".   Lack of time and support could mean that teachers are not consistently applying sociocultural assessment practices. Teachers in this setting often discussed individual children and assessed whether children were developing in 'typical' fashion.

What to do with deficits?

Discussion about what to do with the things children cannot do, how these get addressed and what is appropriate to include within documented assessments came up regularly for teachers within this study. Many different perspectives on what is right or wrong makes trying to make sense of this very difficult for teachers, so more discussion and debate surrounding

educational theory could support teachers' understanding. Teachers in this setting tended to draw on a range of theoretical perspectives to support their assessment practices and at times these perspectives were seemingly at odds with each other. The majority of teachers in this setting had completed initial teacher training at a time when developmental perspectives dominated the curriculum, and have lived through the shift toward more sociocultural perspectives of learning inherent within *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Smith (2013b, p. 15) proposes that "ideas of what is 'normal' for particular age levels have shaped our assumptions about what children can and cannot do". Parents and indeed teachers' notions of competence and what children should be doing within any particular age group are often shaped very early on. When a child is born they are weighed and measured and results are neatly put into charts and Plunket books to show where the child fits in relation to other 'typically' developing children (Fleer, 2010; Smith, 2013b). Within Aotearoa New Zealand we are conditioned through standardised testing within the health sector that there is indeed a 'normal' childhood development. Prior to school entry the Ministry of Health attempts to identify children who may be at risk of behavior and social problems through administering B4 school checks (Smith, 2013b). From birth children are measured against the norm with little to no recognition of each child's individual social and cultural context (Fleer, 2010). Fleer (2010) suggests that 'norms' are established which place children as either fitting within or outside the norm. For those outside the norm there must be problems with their development, this often positions children as failing in particular areas of development.

Teachers within this setting used their knowledge of developmental ages and stages to determine whether the behaviours children were exhibiting was consider 'normal' in relation to their peers. Behaviours of concern were talked about with parents and other teachers but frequently this information failed to show up in documented assessment, where the focus was on showing what children can do. Teachers regularly talked about children's needs and addressed these within the programme, by modifying teaching strategies and environments, however this information was either missing from documented assessment or was spoken about from a positive position. Children's 'needs' had become hidden or not mentioned at all within documented assessments.

The danger of only focusing on what children can do is that some children could slip through the system. Teachers may ignore deficits and children may not be identified as

benefitting from relevant support. Alternatively focusing on children's 'needs' and not recognising children's strengths could mean that teachers are less willing to get to know children. Teachers may also assume that difficulties and problem behaviours relate to outside the early childhood setting and that teachers cannot do much about the 'need' (Smith, 2013b). A need or problem is often a struggle for teachers to make sense of or manage, and teachers can have quite strong emotional responses to the behaviour which can make it challenging to see children's strengths and further hinder teachers getting to know children.

Teachers in this setting really struggled to make sense of 'needs' and place these within documented assessments. Areas of perceived 'need' were frequently spoke about as a teaching team and with children and parents, however often failed to be recorded within assessments. Teachers had a general sense that only strengths should be documented and key literature supports strength based assessments (Ministry of Education, 2004f, 2007b, 2009a)

Audience for assessment

The stakes are high for early childhood services striving to receive a favourable Education Review Office review and it is likely that some settings will aim to highlight assessment practices they believe ERO wants to see. The Education Review Office also produce national evaluation reports which reflect current issues and trends within the education sector (Education Review Office, 2015b). These summaries of findings can and often are used by early childhood settings to review their own practices.

Differing audiences for assessment could shift teachers' focus of what to pay attention to. If teachers are focusing on documenting assessment for external evaluation there could be a tendency to write using a high amount of 'educational jargon' in the hopes of impressing reviewers. The Education Review Office typically completes a review of every teacher led early childhood service every three years (Education Review Office, 2015). Within these reviews ERO looks at aspects of compliance related to the regulatory framework (Ministry of Education, 2008; New Zealand Government, 2008) as well as the current national evaluation topic for the period (Education Review Office, 2015b). Early childhood settings know the national evaluation topic well in advance as they are indicated on the ERO website. It could be assumed that in some way these national evaluation topics influence the way teachers assess children's learning and "as demands for external accountability press more insistently on the profession, surveillance begins to encroach on intuitive and responsive teaching" (Carr, 2001, p. 4).

Smith (2013b, p. 257) believes "while assessment has been used for many other purposes, such as accountability…it is essential that these other purposes do not conflict with the most important goal of assessment, of strengthening children's identities and their motivation for ongoing learning". This highlights how important it is for teachers not to lose sight of one of the main purposes of assessment; strengthening children and their motivation for learning. In order for this to happen teachers should encourage children to self-assess and ensure that all members of the learning community have an opportunity to contribute to assessment in meaningful ways, as "assessment can constrain and restrict children's learning, as well as support it" (Smith, 2013b, p. 241).

Teachers also need to be willing to consult colleagues, community and commit to spending time on assessment

Teachers in this setting were motivated and committed to improving assessment practice. Individually and collectively teachers were reflecting on and continuing to develop ways to get assessment 'right'. Getting it right can be looked at in terms of the responsibility key agencies such as the Ministry of Education and the Education Review Office have in ensuring teachers and services are well informed and supported through resources and professional development to support assessment. However, additional resources and support will not make a considerable difference unless teachers commit to reflecting on and modifying assessment practice where necessary. Teachers are at the forefront of assessing children's learning and have a key role in finding meaningful and manageable ways to document children's learning. Smith (2013b, p. 241) believes that effective assessment "requires a thoroughly professional attitude and knowledge that is unlikely to be acquired casually". Teachers in this setting were prepared to put time and effort into making assessment work.

Inclination: Teachers' responsibilities

Part of being a professional early childhood teacher is about being a critically reflective practitioner. To maintain full teacher registration teachers must continue to ensure they "analyse and appropriately use assessment information, which has been gathered formally and informally" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2015c). For this to happen it is important teachers work together with all members of the learning community.

A teacher reflecting on their own assessment position and practices is important and time to engage in professional discussions as a team and with the learning community to make meaning out of assessment is also beneficial. Dahlberg et al. (2007, p. 107) discuss the

process of meaning making as involving "processes of dialogue and critical reflection". Meaning making, the authors believe, adopts a social constructionist perspective in that through relationships "with others we make meaning of the world" (Dahlberg et al., 2007, p. 107). Teachers making meaning out of assessment requires an understanding of key aspects of assessment, relative to the early childhood context. Engaging in meaningful conversations about assessment with each other, children and families is one way to develop a deeper understanding of each stakeholder's assessment perspective (Dahlberg et al., 2007).

Teachers in this setting valued time to engage with each other about children's learning and assessment and more time and support to investigate assessment could only but enhance teachers' understanding and assessment practice. Smith (2013b, p. 259) supports this believing "teachers can work together in order to build each other's capacity to make professional assessment judgments". Dahlberg et al. (2007, p. 109) also believe judgments about work, which involve the application of understandings, contribute to the process of meaning making and recognising the "fact that there may be many meanings or understandings". To see the value in the process of meaning making and apply this to assessment practices takes an understanding of relevant theory and pedagogy. Much of teachers' knowledge of theory and teaching strategies and practices often comes from initial teacher education and gaining a recognised teacher qualification. Many teachers working within the sector have gained qualifications and are provisionally or fully registered teachers however a number of staff working within ECE do not have a recognised qualification. Education Counts (2015a) statistics show that in 2014, only 868 education and care settings were operating at between 80-100% qualified teachers. The remaining 1489 had less than 80% qualified teaching staff.

Uneven qualification base

The cuts to funding for services operating with 100% qualified teachers and removal of the *Pathways to the Future* target of 100% qualified teachers has meant that a proportion of teachers working within early childhood settings are not qualified (May, 2014). As the top funding tier requires only 80% of teachers to be qualified, hiring unqualified teaching staff who can be paid less is a reality (Smith, 2015). In terms of curriculum and assessment this is not ideal as unqualified teachers will not necessarily have the range of conceptual knowledge as their qualified colleagues (May, 2014; Smith, 2015). The Advisory group in early learning (Ministry of Education, 2015c, p. 11) cautions that "teachers without initial teacher training

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education (ITE) may not have the conceptual tools they need to take best advantage of professional development".

The implication of a lack of qualified teachers is that teachers who may have little knowledge about the purpose of assessment may be asked to document children's learning Alternatively qualified teachers will be asked to write more learning stories to compensate for unqualified staff not contributing to assessment (Perkins, 2013). Perkins (2013) suggests the lack of information about narratives and learning stories means that it is a guessing game for some teachers/settings and these teachers/settings may then struggle to negotiate assessment meanings. Developing assessment meaning is challenging for teachers with knowledge of relevant theory, however it must be even more challenging for those who do not have understanding of theory and assessment practices. The Advisory group report (Ministry of Education, 2015c, p. 11) suggested given the demands of early childhood education "formal qualifications are essential". Although the report stopped short of stating 100% qualified teachers is a recommendation, they did support as a "professional principle, moves toward a fully qualified early childhood education and care workforce in Aotearoa New Zealand" (Ministry of Education, 2015c, p. 11).

Given the uneven qualification base within early childhood education and the complexities of understanding and finding meaningful, manageable ways to assess it is challenging for teachers to make assessment work. Early childhood education and charter schools remain the only levels within the education sector where a teaching qualification is not required. Given the range of literature and research highlighting the benefits of early childhood education (Early Childhood Taskforce, 2011; May, 2014; Mitchell, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2015a, 2015b; Mitchell et al., 2008; Smith, 2015) it is disappointing that current policy directions do not see the value of a fully qualified early childhood education workforce. Assessing children's learning is a complex task and the qualified teachers in this setting were at times struggling to make assessment work.

Working within complexity

Teachers within this setting were at differing points with their assessment understandings and enactment. Individually and collectively teachers were trying to make sense of assessment, relative to their unique setting. Each ECE service is different and caters for different children in different communities. As discussed earlier, intention of *Kei Tua o te Pae* was to provide a

resource each individual setting could use to develop assessment practices which are meaningful for the children, teachers, parents and families within the setting. This is in line with *Te Whāriki* which states "each early childhood service can weave the particular pattern that makes its programme different and distinctive" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 28). A strength of curriculum and assessment within ECE is the scope for diversity, and recognition of the sociocultural nature of learning.

Calls to assess stationary knowledge and skills assume that every child grows and develops in the same way and at the same rate (Hill, 2011). Assessing children based on the same set of predetermined criteria would be easy however a universal notion of development and assessment marginalises minority groups (Agbenyega, 2009). Sociocultural approaches, on the other hand, recognise uniqueness and place importance on the relationships children have with people, places and things (Ministry of Education, 1996). Teachers in this setting were working hard getting to know children and their families and used this information to develop rich assessments. *Te Whāriki* and *Kei Tua o te Pae* encourage a context where the diversity of children, parents, families and communities is acknowledged and celebrated. Complex forms of assessment such as learning stories recognise everyone has a different social and cultural context. Teachers who know children well notice, recognise and respond to children's learning taking relationships and context into account.

These teachers were searching for a 'right' way to assess children's learning in their setting. What is 'right' will differ from setting to setting and child to child, as each setting and child is different. This can create a lot of uncertainty around assessment as teachers negotiate what is 'right'. Getting it 'right' can be ambiguous and hard to define let alone enact. Teachers in this setting were working hard and doing a good job understanding and supporting children's learning. The struggles they had understanding children's learning and using assessment were rich sites for discussion and reflection. Assessing children's learning is hard. The solution is not to make it simple. Struggle is not a sign of failure it is a site for learning. Teachers need support to embrace struggles and complexities and keep learning about assessment.

Limitations and possibilities for future research

A limitation of this research is it was completed in one early childhood setting, with one group of teachers by a beginning researcher. The findings tell the story of one group of teachers' understandings and enactment of assessment and different teachers in different

settings will have different understandings of assessment. The research tells a small part of the assessment story within ECE for these teachers at a particular place in time.

Through completing this study my knowledge and understanding of research, data collection and analysis methods has grown and developed and I look forward to engaging in future research. This research study has raised a number of further questions for consideration in future research projects including:

- Investigation into the ways teachers make sense of theoretical perspectives. In particular how theory influences the assessment decisions teachers make.
- How the teacher registration process supports beginning teachers to make sense of learning assessments.
- How initial teacher education, supports student teachers' understanding and use of assessment within early childhood settings.

Conclusion

This qualitative research study has taken a closer look at assessment understandings and practices within one early childhood setting. Teachers in this setting continued to come to terms with the complexities of assessment individually and collectively and were at times struggling to manage assessment practice and searching for new ways to make assessment work within their context. Teachers questioned what to do with children's identified 'needs' and queried whether these had a place within documented assessments. Developmental perspectives, at times, crept into the way teachers talked about children's learning. Teachers were working on balancing contrasting views of assessment, with developmental and sociocultural perspectives both drawn on by some teachers to assess children's learning.

Teachers in this were working hard supporting and documenting children's learning however, they continued to have questions about how a learning story should be written and what they should write about. Most of the assessment happening within the setting was undocumented. Teachers prioritised getting to know children and families and were using their knowledge of children to plan future learning pathways, with much of this significant knowledge in teachers' heads. Time to talk with each other was valued by teachers and during these times teachers engaged in a number of professional, reflective conversations as they collectively negotiated assessment meanings. As teachers gained new understandings assessment practices shifted and developed, teachers consistently reassessed their own and

other teachers documented assessments. A range of pressures influenced teachers' assessment practice and writing a reader friendly assessment was important to teachers. These experienced and qualified teachers were looking for a way to get it 'right' and shift assessment practices. Teachers were working toward increasingly meaningful and manageable ways to document children's learning, involving all members of the learning community. Teachers were motivated and committed to improving assessment practices.

Narrative assessment is a relative newcomer to early childhood education and teachers have been working with the learning story framework for just over a decade now. The sector has made many gains since the introduction of *Te Whāriki* and *Kei Tua o te Pae*, however the current political climate has in some ways stalled the progress which was being made towards increasingly complex and meaningful assessments. The responsibility for ensuring that teachers are up to the task of confidently using assessment lies not only with teachers themselves but also with; support, advice and guidance agencies, professional development and policy support, initial teacher education providers and induction and mentoring programmes. Strong support is required in order for assessment to reach its full potential as a powerful tool for decision making and implementation of the early childhood curriculum. Assessment is a demanding task and teachers themselves, the Ministry of Education, Education Review Office, the teacher registration process and ITEs all have a role to play in ensuring teachers:

- Are up to the task of assessing children's learning in meaningful and manageable ways

- Have the knowledge of theory and forms of assessment necessary to understand and effectively use assessment tools

- Have time and adequate support to make meaning out of assessment relative to their setting and the children and families within the setting.

With decisions yet to be made on the recommendations from the Advisory Group on Early Learning only time will tell if all of the suggestions within this study will eventuate. Teachers in this setting worked really hard at understanding children's learning and supporting it. Complex forms of assessment need skilled teachers who can manage uncertainty and ambiguity and make assessment work for their unique setting.

Appendix 1

UC
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Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha
CHRISTCHURCH NEW ZEALAND

School of Educational Studies and Leadership
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Date

Authentic assessment in early childhood settings
Information sheet for owner/manager/supervisor

My name is Anna Niles and I am studying towards a Masters of Education at the University of Canterbury. As part of this qualification I am completing a thesis. I am interested in teachers' understandings and interpretations of assessment and the ways teachers assess children's learning. I am approaching you as I am interested in researching assessment within your setting.

The questions shaping this project are based around examining:

How are teachers assessing children's learning in early childhood settings? How do teachers make sense of learning assessments? What are early childhood teachers' understandings of learning assessments?

I would like to invite you and your setting to participate in my present study. My research is of a qualitative nature and teachers' day to day programmes and routines will not be interrupted by my presence. If you agree to participate, with your assistance I will then approach, teachers, children and parents to request consent.

If you agree to the setting participating I will be:
  o Observing assessment practices within the setting. This will involve me spending 2-3 hour blocks of time in your setting generally twice a week for a period of six to eight months. I will arrange times suitable to the setting with you in advance of arrival. Observations will focus on assessment practices and it is likely this will include conversations teachers have with children, parents and other teachers regarding assessment. As part of observing I will be taking brief notes regarding assessment practices within the setting. I will then write these notes up as comprehensive field notes.
  o Making copies and taking some photos of assessment related documentation within the setting. This is likely to include, assessment policies, completed assessments, planning material connecting to assessments within the setting.
  o Attending, observing and recording relevant meetings discussing assessment within the setting.

Your involvement will be:
  o Working with me to approach teachers, children and parents to obtain consent.
  o Sharing assessment procedures with me, including the ways in which you support teachers' assessment practices, assessment related policies and planning materials. This may also include any self-review documentation you may have relating to assessment.
  o Participating in a semi-structured (some questions will be pre-set based on my observations from within the setting) group recorded interview. It is hoped that this can coincide with a regular meeting time within your setting. The length of this interview will be negotiated with you.
  o Participating in a semi-structured individual recorded interview. Interviews will take approximately 45-60 minutes and the time and setting for these interviews will be at your

convenience. Group and individual interviews will be recorded on a digital recorder and I will transcribe these into interview notes. When the group and individual interviews have been transcribed I will provide you with a transcript of your comments from the group interview and your individual interview to review and make any changes.

Please note that participation in this study is voluntary. If you do participate, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw, I will remove any information relating to you.

How will my privacy be protected and how will information from the study be used?

I will take care to ensure the confidentiality of all data gathered for this study. All research data will be stored in password protected facilities on an external hard drive, with backups kept on flash drives. Electronic and physical data will be kept within a locked cabinet at the University of Canterbury campus backup data will be kept in a locked cabinet at my place of work. Although all reasonable precautions will be taken to protect data transmitted by email, the security of this information cannot be guaranteed. Data will be kept for five years following the study, it will then be destroyed. My research supervisors Missy Morton and Judith Duncan will also have access to parts of the data to support me throughout the research project.

No participants will have their names revealed and I will also take care to ensure your anonymity in publications of the findings. However, given the relatively small early childhood community within New Zealand it may not be possible to ensure complete anonymity. This means that even though I will not be identifying the setting or participants names, the description of the setting may make it possible for readers to ascertain the setting, and potentially participants.

All participants will be given a 1-2 page summary of the results of the study when it is completed. This research will be written up as a thesis, which is part of the completion of my Masters of Education. The completed thesis will be available for access through the University of Canterbury's library and I will provide you with a link to this. There will also be articles written about this project and presentations made to conferences and educational gatherings; but these will not identify the setting or any of the participants.

You may contact me at any time throughout the research if you have any comments or questions. If for any reason you or others disclose any information causing concern for the safety children I will follow the procedures of the centre to protect you and children within the setting. As above you have the right to withdraw from the study at any point, and/or ask that certain material/conversations not be recorded at any time.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me (details above).

This research has received ethical approval from the University of Canterbury Research Human Ethics Committee. If you have a compliant about the study, please address these to The Chair, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).

If you agree to participate in this study, please complete the attached consent form and return it to me in the envelope provided by Monday 21st July.

I am looking forward to working with you and thank you in advance for your contributions.

Anna Niles

Date

Authentic assessment in early childhood settings
Consent form for owner/manager/supervisor

I have been given a full explanation of this project. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and all questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can ask for more information at any time.

I understand what is required of me if I agree to take part in the research.

I understand that:

- I do not have to participate in this study.
- This project involves the observation of informal conversations between me and other teachers/parents/children regarding assessment. If I feel hesitant or uncomfortable at any time I can withdraw from the project without disadvantage. Withdrawal of participation will also include the withdrawal of any information I have provided.
- I know that I can also ask that recording of interviews, observations, or other recordings be stopped temporarily or permanently. This project involves informal discussion and questioning where the precise nature of the questions (or what is discussed) has not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interviews and the project develops. In the event that the line of questioning develops in such a way that I feel hesitant or uncomfortable I can decline to answer any questions and may withdraw from the project without any disadvantage.
- I understand that the name of the centre and individuals will be kept confidential and will not be published in any material. However, I understand that anonymity cannot be guaranteed. I understand the risks associated with taking part and how they will be managed.
- Information will be kept confidential to the researcher and research supervisors, and that any published or reported results will not identify the participants. I understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the University of Canterbury Library.
- Excerpts from the observations and interviews may be used in publications and presentations relating to this project (with all identifying details removed).
- All data collected for the study will be kept in locked and secure facilities and/or in password protected electronic form and will be destroyed after five years.
- All reasonable precautions will be taken to protect data transmitted by email, but the security of the information cannot be guaranteed.
- I can ask for any information relating to me at any point throughout the project.
- I will receive a 1-2 page report on the findings of the study at the conclusion of the project. I will also be provided a link to the full completed thesis.
- I give consent for the researcher to notify me if any participants disclose any information causing concern for the safety a child.

I understand that I can contact the researcher, Anna Niles (03 366 8000) or supervisor, Missy Morton (03 364 2987 ext. 44312) for further information. If I have any complaints, I can contact the Chair of the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)

By signing below, I agree to participate in this research project.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Please return this completed consent form to Anna Niles in the envelope provided by Monday 21st July.

Thank-you in advance
Anna Niles

Appendix 2

School of Educational Studies and Leadership
Telephone: +64 3 366 8000
Email: anna.niles@pg.canterbury.ac.nz

Date

Authentic assessment in early childhood settings
Information sheet for teachers

My name is Anna Niles and I am studying towards a Masters of Education at the University of Canterbury. As part of this qualification I am completing a thesis. I am interested in teachers' understandings and interpretations of assessment and the ways teachers assess children's learning. I have obtained consent from the manager/supervisor/owner to research assessment practices in your setting. I am now outlining what research will mean for you as a teacher, and asking for your consent.

The questions shaping this project are based around examining:

How are teachers assessing children's learning in early childhood settings? How do teachers make sense of learning assessments? What are early childhood teachers' understandings of learning assessment?

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

If you agree to participate I will be:
- o Observing your assessment practices. This will involve me spending 2-3 hour blocks of time in your setting generally twice a week for a period of six to eight months. Observations will focus on assessment practices. It is likely this will include conversations you have with children, parents (I will be seeking consent for this from children and parents) and other teachers regarding assessment. As part of observing I will be taking brief notes regarding assessment practices within the setting. I will then write these notes up as comprehensive field notes.
- o Making copies and taking some photos of assessment related documentation within the setting. This is likely to include, assessment policies, completed assessments (I will be seeking consent for this from parents and children), planning material connecting to assessments within the setting.
- o Attending, observing and recording relevant meetings discussing assessment within the setting.

Your involvement will be:
- o Sharing your assessment procedures with me, including learning stories [Note: wording here may change depending on assessment used within the setting], planning materials and the ways in which you usually assess children's learning
- o Participating in a semi-structured (some questions will be pre-set based on my observations from within the setting) group recorded interview. It is hoped that this can coincide with a regular meeting time within your setting.
- o Participating in a semi-structured individual recorded interview. Interviews will take approximately 45-60 minutes and the time and setting for these interviews will be at your convenience.

Group and individual interviews will be recorded on a digital recorder and I will transcribe these into interview notes. When the group and individual interviews have been transcribed I will provide you with a transcript of your comments from the group interview and your individual interview to review and make any changes.

Please note that participation in this study is voluntary. If you do participate, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw, I will remove any information relating to you.

How will my privacy be protected and how will information from the study be used?

I will take care to ensure the confidentiality of all data gathered for this study. All research data will be stored in password protected facilities on an external hard drive, with backups kept on flash drives. Electronic and physical data will be kept within a locked cabinet at the University of Canterbury campus backup data will be kept in a locked cabinet at my personal address. Although all reasonable precautions will be taken to protect data transmitted by email, the security of this information cannot be guaranteed. Data will be kept for five years following the study, it will then be destroyed. My research supervisors Missy Morton and Judith Duncan will also have access to parts of the data to support me throughout the research project.

No participants will have their names revealed and I will also take care to ensure your anonymity in publications of the findings. However, given the relatively small early childhood community within New Zealand it may not be possible to ensure complete anonymity. This means that even though I will not be identifying the setting or participants names, the description of the setting may make it possible for readers to ascertain the setting, and potentially participants.

All teachers will be given a 1-2 page summary of the results of the study when it is completed. This research will be written up as a thesis, which is part of the completion of my Masters of Education. The completed thesis will be available for access through the University of Canterbury's library and I will provide you with a link to this. There will also be articles written about this project and presentations made to conferences and educational gatherings; but these will not identify you.

You may contact me at any time throughout the research if you have any comments or questions. If for any reason you disclose any information causing concern for the safety children I will follow the procedures of the centre to protect you and children within the setting. As above you have the right to withdraw from the study at any point, and/or ask that certain material/conversations not be recorded at any time.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me (details above).

This research has received ethical approval from the University of Canterbury Research Human Ethics Committee. If you have a compliant about the study, please address these to The Chair, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).

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

I am looking forward to working with you and thank you in advance for your contributions.

Anna Niles

School of Educational Studies and Leadership
Telephone: +64 3 366 8000
Email: anna.niles@pg.canterbury.ac.nz

Date

Authentic assessment in early childhood settings
Consent form for teachers

I have been given a full explanation of this project. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and all questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can ask for more information at any time.

I understand what is required of me if I agree to take part in the research.

I understand that:

- I do not have to participate in this study.
- This project involves the observation of informal conversations between me and other teachers/parents/children regarding assessment. If I feel hesitant or uncomfortable at any time I can withdraw from the project without disadvantage. Withdrawal of participation will also include the withdrawal of any information I have provided.
- I know that I can also ask that recording of interviews, observations, or other recordings be stopped temporarily or permanently. This project involves informal discussion and questioning where the precise nature of the questions (or what is discussed) has not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interviews and the project develops. In the event that the line of questioning develops in such a way that I feel hesitant or uncomfortable I can decline to answer any questions and may withdraw from the project without any disadvantage.
- I understand the name of the centre and individuals will be kept confidential and will not be published in any material. However, I understand that anonymity cannot be guaranteed. I understand the risks associated with taking part and how they will be managed.
- Information will be kept confidential to the researcher and research supervisors, and that any published or reported results will not identify the participants. I understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the University of Canterbury Library.
- Excerpts from the observations and interviews may be used in publications and presentations relating to this project (with all identifying details removed).
- All data collected for the study will be kept in locked and secure facilities and/or in password protected electronic form and will be destroyed after five years.
- All reasonable precautions will be taken to protect data transmitted by email, but the security of the information cannot be guaranteed.
- I can ask for any information relating to me at any point throughout the project.
- I will receive a 1-2 page report on the findings of the study at the conclusion of the project. I will also be provided a link to the full completed thesis.
- I give consent for the researcher to notify the manager/lead teacher [note: terms could be changed here depending on titles used within the setting] if I disclose any information causing concern for the safety a child.

I understand that I can contact the researcher, Anna Niles (03 366 8000) or supervisor, Missy Morton (03 364 2987 ext. 44312) for further information. If I have any complaints, I can contact the Chair of the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)

By signing below, I agree to participate in this research project.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Thank-you in advance
Anna Niles

Appendix 3

School of Educational Studies and Leadership
Telephone: +64 3 366 800
Email: anna.niles@pg.canterbury.ac.nz

Date

Authentic assessment in early childhood settings
Information sheet for parents

[Insert photo of me] My name is Anna Niles and I am currently studying towards a Masters of Education at the University of Canterbury. As part of this qualification I am completing a thesis. I am interested in teachers' understandings and interpretations of assessment and the ways teachers assess children's learning.

The questions shaping this project are based around examining:

How are teachers assessing children's learning in early childhood settings? How do teachers make sense of learning assessments? What are early childhood teachers' understandings of learning assessment?

The focus of the research is on teachers' understandings and use of assessment. It is anticipated that this will likely involve the ways in which teachers communicate with you and your child/children through assessments. I would like to invite you to participate in my present study.

Involvement in this research will mean I will be:
- Observing and recording interactions you and your child/children have with teachers regarding assessment.
- Looking assessment material which may feature your child/children, which is likely to include, learning stories, weekly/monthly planning. [Note: terms will change here depending on how the setting refers to assessment and planning documents].
- Taking some visual recordings (photos) for discussing with teachers. The focus here will be on how the teachers are using and making sense of assessment material. Details of your child/children's learning and development and your contributions to assessment will not be the focus.

Your involvement will be:
- Agreeing to me observing discussions you and your child/children have with teachers regarding assessment.
- Agreeing to me taking a copy of assessment material relevant to the study, this may include but is not limited to; your child/children's learning stories, photos of centre displays which may involve your child/children, copies of assessment and planning materials which may feature your child/children. Please note that this project is focusing on teachers' understandings and use of assessment, not your child's learning and development.

Please note that participation in this study is voluntary. If you do participate, you and your child/children have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw, I will remove any information relating to you, provided this is practically achievable.

How will my privacy be protected and how will information from the study be used?

I will take care to ensure the confidentiality of all data gathered for this study. All research data will be stored in password protected facilities on an external hard drive, with backups kept on flash drives. Electronic and physical data will be kept within a locked cabinet at the University of Canterbury campus backup data will be kept in a locked cabinet at my personal address. Although all reasonable precautions will be taken to protect data transmitted by email, the security of this information cannot be guaranteed. Data will be kept for five years following the study, it will then be destroyed. My research supervisors Missy Morton and Judith Duncan will also have access to parts of the data to support me throughout the research project.

No participants will have their names revealed and I will also take care to ensure anonymity in publications of the findings. However, given the relatively small early childhood community within New Zealand it may not be possible to ensure complete anonymity. This means that even though I will not be identifying the setting or participants names, the description of the setting may make it possible for readers to ascertain the setting, and potentially participants.

All families/whānau will be given a 1-2 page summary of the results of the study when it is completed. This research will be written up as a thesis, which is part of the completion of my Masters of Education. The completed thesis will be available for access through the University of Canterbury's library and I will provide you with a link to this. There will also be articles written about this project and presentations made to conferences and educational gatherings; but these will not identify yourself or your child.

You may contact me at any time throughout the research if you have any comments or questions. If for any reason you, your child/children or a family member disclose any information causing concern for the safety of your child/children I will follow the procedures of the centre to protect you or your child/children. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any point, and/or ask that certain material/conversations not be recorded at any time.

My research supervisors Missy Morton and Judith Duncan will also have access to parts of the research data to support me within throughout the research project. All the data will be securely stored in password protected facilities and locked storage at the University of Canterbury for five years following the study. It will then be destroyed.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me (details above).

This research has received ethical approval from the University of Canterbury Research Human Ethics Committee. If you have a compliant about the study, please address these to The Chair, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).

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

I am looking forward to working with you and thank you in advance for your contributions.

Anna Niles

School of Educational Studies and Leadership
Telephone: +64 3 366 8000
Email: anna.niles@pg.canterbury.ac.nz

Date

Authentic assessment in early childhood settings
Consent form for parents

I have been given a full explanation of this project and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I have read that information sheet concerning this study and understand I can ask additional questions at any time.

I understand what is required of me if I agree to take part in the research.

I understand that:
- Myself and/or my child/children do not have to participate in this study.
- I can withdraw myself or my child/children at any time without penalty. Or ask that recording and observation of myself and/or my child/children be stopped at any time temporarily or permanently.
- This project involves the observation of informal conversations between teachers and myself and/or my child regarding assessment. If I or my child/children feel hesitant or uncomfortable at any time I and/or my child/children can ask recording and observation be stopped at any time temporarily or permanently. Withdrawal of participation will also include the withdrawal of any information I have provided.
- Any information or opinions I have provided will be kept confidential to the researcher and research supervisors, and that any published or reported results will not identify the participants. I understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the University of Canterbury Library.
- Excerpts from the observations of myself and/or my child/children may be used in publications and representations relating to this project (with all identifying details removed).
- All data collected for the study will be kept in locked and secure facilities and/or in password protected electronic form and will be destroyed after five years.
- All reasonable precautions will be taken to protect data transmitted by email, but the security of the information cannot be guaranteed.
- I will receive a 1-2 page report on the findings of the study at the conclusion of the project. I will also be provided a link to the full completed thesis.
- I give consent for the researcher to notify the manager/lead teacher [note: terms could be changed here depending on titles used within the setting] if my child discloses any information causing concern for the safety of children.
- I have discussed the project with my child/children and she/he has had the information sheet read to her/him.
- I understand the risks associated with taking part and how they will be managed.

I understand that I can contact the researcher, Anna Niles (03 366 800) or supervisor, Missy Morton (03 364 2987 ext. 44312) for further information. If I have any complaints, I can contact the Chair of the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)

I agree to participate in this research project: Yes/No

I agree that my child/children can take part in this project   Yes/No

Child's Name: _____

Parent's Name (please print): _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Please return this completed consent form to [name] in the envelope provided by [Day/month]

Thank-you in advance
Anna Niles

Appendix 4

School of Educational Studies and Leadership
Telephone: +64 3 3668000
Email: anna.niles@pg.canterbury.ac.nz

Date

Authentic assessment in early childhood settings
Information sheet for children
(for the parent/teachers to read to the child)

Anna Niles is doing work at University which is a school for big people.

She is going to look at the stories, in your profile books, that teachers write about you and your friends. [Note; depending on the terms used within the centre the wording could be changed]

She will watch how teachers talk with you about the stories in your profile book. [Note: this could change depending on what teachers call assessments]

She will watch teachers talking to your Mum and Dad/parents to see what they think about your stories. At your centre/preschool [Note could change depending on the setting] everything will be just the same – nothing will change.

You can choose what you would like to be called when Anna writes about your centre/preschool so that no-one will know your real name.

Your Mum and Dad/parents and teachers have also been asked to help. If you have any questions, you can talk to your Mum and Dad/parents or to me (as applicable).

If you change your mind about letting Anna watch and talk with you, your teachers, Mum's and Dad's/parents, that's fine too. All you have to do is tell your Mum and Dad/parents or me (as applicable)

Thank you.

Anna Niles

School of Educational Studies and Leadership
Telephone: +64 3 366 8000
Email: anna.niles@pg.canterbury.ac.nz

Date

Authentic assessment in early childhood settings
Consent form for child

My Mum/Dad/parent/teacher has told me about your work at the University.

I am happy for Anna Niles to look at some of the stories in my profile book. [Note: I will change the name profile book to the terms used within the centre around assessment documentation].

I know that what Anna writes about me will not be told to anyone else and will be kept in a safe place. Anna will also not use my real name and I can choose what I would like to be called when Anna writes about me. Anna will not use my Mum/Dad/parent/teachers names or the name of my centre in her work. All information will be destroyed after the work is written up. My Mum and Dad/parent and my teachers will receive a small book about Anna's work.

I know that I can change my mind about being part of Anna's work and no-one will mind.

I know that if I have any questions I can ask my Mum/Dad/parent or my teacher.

Childs name: _____

Date: _____

Childs signature or mark: _____

Please return this completed consent form to [name] in the envelope provided by [Day/month]

Anna Niles

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