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Do learning stories tell the whole story of children’s learning? 
A phenomenographic enquiry

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ABSTRACT
This study compares the stances of practitioners, parents and the quality assurance authority on the assessment of learning in New Zealand (NZ) early childhood education (ECE). The phenomenographic interview participants include practitioners (24) and parents (11) from 11 ECE settings. The reports issued by the Education Review Office (ERO) on all the sampled ECE settings are also analysed. The study shows that: (1) The practitioners and parents emphasize the importance of teacher–parent communication, listening to the child, progression and team assessment for assessment of learning in general, while the ERO attaches the importance of the same categories specifically to learning stories; (2) Irrespective of the strengths and limitations of learning stories, the practitioners and parents affirm that learning stories are not the only approach to assessment of learning, which is in contrast with the ERO’s implied position that learning stories are the only and best approach to the assessment of learning. The findings call for research that explores the implementation of a comprehensive approach to the assessment of learning in ECE in NZ.

Assessment of learning in early childhood education (ECE) is a long-contested area in both research and practice. The diverse definitions of assessment of learning in ECE highlight its multiple purposes and a range of ways, procedures, strategies and methods. Despite the fact that no universally applicable assessment model exists, there has been an increasing interest among both researchers and practitioners in pedagogical documentation (Kalliala and Pramling Samuelsson 2014; Picchio, Di Giandomenico, and Musatti 2014). As one specific type of pedagogical documentation, learning stories prioritizes properly written storylines. For over a decade, the learning stories approach has dominated the assessment of learning in New Zealand (NZ) ECE, due to the unreserved endorsement and support from the Ministry of Education. For example, ‘Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars’, a series of Ministry of Education publications, includes no methods other than learning stories (Ministry of Education [2004, 2007], 2009). By 2008, 94% of the nation’s ECE services had been implementing this approach (Mitchell 2008). Recently, researchers have expressed concerns over the limitations of learning stories (Blaiklock 2008, 2011). In his position article,
Zhang (2015a, 66) contends that ‘assessment has multiple purposes that require multiple tools rather than a one-size-fits-all approach’ and advocates for a comprehensive approach to assessment of learning in NZ.

This study was impelled by a case of dispute between a NZ ECE service and the Education Review Office (ERO), NZ’s ECE quality assurance body, over ‘best practice’ of assessment of learning. In a scheduled quality review, ERO found the service’s non-learning stories system to be ‘based on out dated methods that do not promote children’s competence as life-long learners’ (Hamilton 2014, 14), a view which was challenged by the service and led to a legal process. As a result, the ERO removed the negative comments, and NZ Early Childhood Council’s official magazine described that the ERO processes ‘have been called into question after an experienced educator was forced to defend her good reputation in a saga which resulted in significant legal expenses and wasted time’ (Hamilton 2014, 14).

Hypothesizing that the case is not an isolated incident, and that other ECE services may also not truly embrace the ERO approach to assessment of learning, this study is intended to uncover the deep feelings and thoughts of practitioners and parents on assessment of the children’s learning that may be at odds with the ERO approach. The research question is: Do ECE settings in NZ support the approach to assessment of learning taken by the ECE quality assurance authority of NZ?

**Literature review**

**Assessment of learning**

Assessment is a complex concept that entails multiple purposes, for example, understanding children’s learning (Drummond 1993); understanding the functioning of young children (Brassard and Boehm 2007); and monitoring whether children are achieving learning goals (McLachlan, Fleer, and Edwards 2013). The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia defines assessment for children’s learning as ‘the process of gathering and analyzing information as evidence about what children know, can do and understand’ (DEEWR 2009, 17). Te Whāriki, the NZ ECE curriculum document, provides that the purpose of assessment is to ‘give useful information about children’s learning and development’ (Ministry of Education 1996, 29). In the USA, the NAEYC (2009) emphasizes assessment’s function of identifying concerns that may require focused intervention for individual children.

Regarding the quality of assessment, Te Whāriki emphasizes a focus on individual children and prohibits ‘making comparisons between children’ (Ministry of Education 1996, 29). The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia stresses the use of ‘appropriate ways to collect rich and meaningful information’ (DEEWR 2009, 17), while NAEYC (2009) specifies that assessment should be age appropriate, and multiple sources of evidence should be gathered over time. In the United States, the formal, standardized testing system has been criticized for its monocultural and ethnocentric perspective (Aldwinckle 2001) and its isolation from children’s everyday environment (Bagnato 2007). As an alternative, authentic assessment has been advocated which requires what is observed to be ‘naturally occurring’ (Bagnato 2007, 27). Authentic assessment is a key feature of the High/Scope child assessment (Epstein, Johnson, and Lafferty 2011), and it is also indicative of Head Start (Grisham-Brown, Hallam, and Brookshire 2006). The Reggio Emilia assessment approach features documentation which consists of ‘traces of learning’ (Gandini 2011). According to Rinaldi (2014), in
producing the documentation, educators make the element of value visible and sharable, and teachers ‘cannot document without assessing’ (4).

**Pedagogical documentation**

Pedagogical documentation is described by Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2007) as ‘a vital tool for the creation of a reflective and democratic pedagogical practice’ (145); ‘a process of visualization … [and] a social construction’ (147); and playing ‘a central role in the discourse of meaning making’ (145). It is also described as visible listening to reconstruct children’s learning processes (Rinaldi 2001), as a pedagogy of listening (Gandini and Kaminsky 2004), as process documentation (Picchio, Di Giandomenico, and Musatti 2014), and as the teacher’s story of the movement of children’s understanding (Wien, Guyevskey, and Berdoussis 2011). According to Krechevsky and Mardell (2001), as a key feature of the Reggio Emilia approach, pedagogical documentation is ‘documenting children’s learning processes [that] helps to make learning visible and shapes the learning that takes place’ (288).

Pedagogical documentation involves ‘a broad range of documentation (video, tape recordings, written notes and so on) produced and used in process (that is, during the experience)’ (Rinaldi 2001, 84). It has been widely agreed that there is no best tool for pedagogical documentation. Seitz (2008) suggests that the format of pedagogical documentation ‘can be as varied as the creator’s mind permits’ (88). Birbili and Tzioga (2014) observe that ‘while some parents might feel comfortable writing narrative reports or keeping a home diary, others might have time only for a checklist or a rating scale, or prefer verbal communication’ (162). Picchio, Di Giandomenico, and Musatti (2014) provide ‘a variety of means [such as] display panels with photos on specific children’s activities, interactions or even emotions, and videos or written reports’ (133). According to Krechevsky and Mardell (2001), pedagogical documentation ‘is not about creating beautiful panels or displays, but about following and shaping the knowledge-building process’ (289), and it should not take the practitioner away from practice. Krechevsky and Mardell (2001) elaborate that, when the children are learning in groups, they ‘rely as much on their peers and themselves as on the teachers for feedback and problem solving … [so] teachers can devote more time to documentation, or engage in extended interactions or conversations with one or more children, while the rest of the class continues to work on its own’ (290).

Like all other assessment approaches, pedagogical documentation has its limitations. First, it can be time-consuming (Emilson and Pramling Samuelsson 2014; Kalliala and Pramling Samuelsson 2014). Second, since it is impossible to prescribe an optimum amount of documentation, ‘there is a risk of accumulating too much documentation, which is then not used for joint reflection, analysis and the further development of the preschool’ (Emilson and Pramling Samuelsson 2014, 178). Third, in spite of certain alleged exceptions (e.g. one can claim that s/he still maintains interaction with the children while taking photos of them), the act of documenting is inherently contradictory to the act of teaching – it may be difficult to be active in teaching while documenting (Buldu 2010). The fourth limitation relates to subjectivity. Kalliala and Pramling Samuelsson (2014) observe that pedagogical documentation ‘is prioritized and censored even before it is written’ (117). Similarly, Emilson and Pramling Samuelsson (2014) comment that when documenting teachers may ‘try to see what they want to see’ (184).
Learning Stories

Containing storylines of a learning process, a learning story is a documented account (through narrative and annotated photos) of a child's learning event. Carr and Lee (2012) regard learning stories as an assessment tool where 'adults and children tell and retell stories of learning and competence, reflecting on the past and planning for the future' (2), and argue that by making the connection between sociocultural approaches to pedagogy and assessment and narrative inquiry, learning stories can construct learner identities in ECE programs. Learning stories are a particular form of documented and structured observations (Carr 2001). Although writing learning stories may involve the use of multimedia tools such as digital cameras (Carr 2001), in essence, learning stories are a particular form of pedagogical documentation (Southcott 2015), and therefore share the main features of pedagogical documentation such as 'making learning visible' (Carr and Lee 2012).

Despite the variations in the format, the NZ version of learning stories is characterized by what is termed the NRR (noticing, recognizing and responding) approach. The introductory book of the series of publications 'Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars' defines,

Assessment for learning is described as ‘noticing, recognizing, and responding’ … These three processes are progressive filters. Teachers notice a great deal as they work with children, and they recognize some of what they notice as ‘learning’. They will respond to selection of what they recognize. (Ministry of Education 2004, 6)

The guiding document elaborates,

The difference between noticing and recognizing is the application of professional expertise and judgements … if there is a time gap between noticing and recognizing, the teacher can’t act (respond) in the moment. The exemplars have been published to assist with closing the gap so that many more responses will be immediate and professional and all members of the learning community will be better able to notice, recognize, and respond to children’s learning. (Ministry of Education 2004, 6)

Methods

The key data collection method for the current study is phenomenographic interview. Phenomenography aims to uncover how a group of people experience, perceive and understand a phenomenon, and it has the potential to reveal latent, collective experience (Marton 1994). According to Marton (1994), in a phenomenographic interview, interviewer and interviewee jointly constitute the experiences and understandings, and therefore, the interview questions evolve from the interview and largely depend on what the interviewee has to say. In this study, assessment of learning is a complex phenomenon experienced by practitioners and parents, and the ‘collective experience’ of practitioners and parents is a focus. Most importantly, the ‘evolving’ nature of the interview questions allows in-depth and nuanced data to be captured, and therefore, phenomenographic interview serves the purpose of this study well.

Interview participants were 24 practitioners (11 managers, 13 teachers) and 11 parents from 11 ECE settings in a North Island city in NZ. I conducted all the individual interviews in the ECE settings during the period March – June of 2015. Each interview lasted for 30–50 min, and was audio taped and transcribed. The overarching interview question was: Could you describe your experience with, and understanding of, assessment of the children’s learning?
I used prompting and probing questions to enable the experience and understanding to be ‘jointly constituted’. For example, when a participant’s response implied that learning was limited to literacy and numeracy, I would ask, ‘What else do you think a child is learning?’ When a participant had nothing to say about the assessment other than only a general comment, I would ask, ‘If you were the decision-maker, how would you do the assessment differently?’ Such questions were intended, when necessary, to ‘scaffold’ or ‘challenge’ the participants to ensure that all participants address the same issues (validity) and exercise the same level of reflection and thoughtfulness (reliability).

Ethics approval was granted by my employing institution. I made initial contacts with all the nearby ECE settings listed on the local yellow page to invite participation. As a result, 11 ECE settings gave their permission and were selected. In addition to the phenomenographic interviews that reveal the perspectives of the practitioners and parents, the data also include relevant parts of the ERO reports of all sampled ECE settings.

**Data analysis and findings**

I analysed the interview data using Marton’s seven-step approach – familiarizing, condensing, comparing, grouping, articulating, labelling and contrasting (Aflague and Ferszt 2010; Marton 1986). I read the interview transcripts carefully and selected the most relevant statements for further analysis. Then I compared and grouped together similar responses and articulated the essence of the similarity. Then I labelled each group of responses into a category. Finally, I checked the categories further against each other and ensured that each category represented a qualitative variation. In phenomenography, logical relations between categories of description are termed as ‘outcome space’ (Marton 1994) which usually forms the results of a phenomenographic study along with the categories of description. I illustrated the categories with selected quotes from relevant participants. Also, I used a code to identify each participant: M01-M11 for managers, T01-T13 for teachers and P01-P11 for parents.

All comments on the assessment of learning in all the ERO reports were used for analysis. The ERO reports are written in very concise and non-discursive language, which allows all meaning units to be categorized straightforwardly. The 11 reports are identified with a code (R01-R11).

**The practitioners’ experience and understanding (outcome space 1)**

Seven categories were captured from the interview data provided by the managers and teachers: communication with parents, listening to the child, progression, team assessment, strength of learning stories, limitation to learning stories and multiple tools.

The category **communication with parents** highlights the importance of information from the parents for assessment, as illustrated below,

> I think when the parents come back and tell us what their child has done at home, it’s been a little bit different to what they’ve learned here, then we know that child is learning, so an example would be last week one mum came in and her little boy is 18 months old, when he finished his morning tea, he went to the bathroom to look for a towel, and that wasn’t the practice he practices at home, so then we know that that child is learning something. [M03]

The category **listening to the child** indicates that information from the child is part of assessment, as illustrated below,
I know they are learning because … they come to you to ask questions, and they come to you with information, when they found something out and when they’ve done something over the weekend they come and tell you, when they can tell you something they had done or show you something they had done, to me that’s all part of learning. [T08]

The category progression denotes that the assessment should capture some milestones in learning and development, as illustrated below,

When you spend time with the child, you speak with them, you watch them, or you observe them, you can kind of see where they are at and their development, and then as you progress two or three months’ time, or you need to spend your time again with that child, and you can see whether the development has gone or hasn’t. [T10]

The category team assessment informs the collaborative nature of assessment in ECE, as illustrated below,

We have in-depth planning meetings, as a team we talk about children, we take each story to each meeting, and usually different children, so from the discussion about one child, all the teachers sit and discuss what they are seeing happening for that child, and then you get a more in-depth understanding, because sometimes you don’t see what they are learning but other teachers do. [T09]

The category strength of learning stories applies to only a couple of teachers who acknowledged that learning stories are visually appealing to the parents, as illustrated below,

In terms of you presenting something, the parents like portfolio books, they do, they like to see the pictures, they like to read everybody. [T02]

The majority of the practitioners mentioned at least one of the four limitations to learning stories as illustrated below,

Subjective. If you write a story, it’s one sided, it’s my perspective, I believe this is what the child is learning … but whether the child is learning or not can be contradicted to … you know. [T03]

Selective. There are a lot of variations on what information you put in it, you can’t put everyone in every story, so you just sort of you know you have to pick some aspects you are looking at. [T03]

Time consuming. You can’t do in an hour’s non-contact, there is not enough time, it take some hours to write one story for us, so it’s about getting teachers more time. [T01]

Superficial. A lot of learning stories are very basic, you know it tells you what the child did in the sandpit, but it doesn’t go into the relationship, it’s about you know the relationship between the children and cooperation and the patience they have with each other, it’s all those sort of things, you need to look into deeper. [T07]

Over half of the practitioners stated explicitly that assessment of learning involved multiple tools rather than learning stories only, and none of the practitioners stated otherwise, as illustrated below,

Learning stories aren’t the only … you can use photos, you know, a picture tells a thousand words without even having a story associated with it, displays on the wall of children’s work and achievements, and we also use anecdotal observation notes, we have pages, we just handwrite on it, it is not a particular learning story, … we are just starting using videos as well, so there is a broad spectrum than just learning stories. [M05]

Learning stories are not sufficient … we are having daily diary pictures, what the children do in the week, and monthly area pictures, what they did in that month in the art area, and parents can see those things. … [T04]

There is a whole different range of assessment process that we can use, we look at individual child’s strengths and interests not just learning stories, there is all different ranges of looking at
the child’s learning and supporting them extending and documenting that, obviously learning stories is [sic] just one way of doing that. [M01]

**The parents’ experience and understanding (outcome space 2)**

Five categories were captured from the interview data provided by the parents: communication with teachers, listening to the child, progression, strength of learning stories and limitation to learning stories.

The category *communication with teachers* denotes that teachers are the main source of information about their child’s learning for parents, as illustrated below,

> Asking the teachers about what she's done for the day, so if she's got a certain problem area then I'll come and discuss with them, and like I said just by coming in and talking to the teachers, and finding out what she's done, what she's up to, and you know if they are focusing on any of it. [P03]

The category *listening to the child* indicates that the child himself/herself is also a source of information for parents, as illustrated below,

> My daughter talks to me a lot about what she does here, she tells me everyday about what she's been doing, so I have a good idea of what she does everyday, she will talk to me about what she is learning here, every aspect of what she is doing, for example, she really enjoyed the gardening project here, digging up the potatoes then cooking, she tells me all about that, she learns a lot from that. [P04]

The category *progression* denotes that progress in learning and development is a highlight of assessment of learning, as illustrated below,

> He is quite a risk-taker, and he was climbing up the little rope bridge that they have, between the blue block and the red block there is a rope bridge that looks like a net, and he was climbing across that … you know they noted that he hadn't done that before, they stood at the bottom and they looked at it, and he moved away from that, then one of the teachers noted that he was half way up, he was holding on, and he got to the top, he was really excited with what he's done, … it was a clear indication that actually he was learning new things here because that was something that he was afraid to do before. [P01]

Over half of the parents mentioned one or more *strengths of learning stories*, as illustrated below,

> I love the stories they write up here, you know, they’re speaking to the child about it when they write it, but they say in it what the changes they noticed, or they link it to *Te Whariki* and get the curriculum link, … I think they are very good at seeing when the child is doing something new. [P11]

> I think what we are getting from the learning stories is a wonderful documentation of her time at the kindy, something she would love to flip through, it’s colorful, it brings back memories. [P02]

Nearly half of the parents mentioned one or more *limitations to learning stories*, as illustrated below,

> It looks pretty, but the information is quite unsubstantial, you are not getting … because I see the photos of my child, I don’t want … I know what my child looks like [laugh] you know, I don’t need to see her with the firemen, I kind of know what she looks like, but I don’t know what’s going on in their brain, you know? I think it’s got to be … if teachers are going to spend time giving parents information, it has to be quality information. [P10]

> If the teachers are spending time producing this kind of portfolios, then they are not spending time with my child, so I really don’t want them to spend lots of time doing this. [P07]
The ERO approach (outcome space 3)

Seven categories were captured from the ERO reports: parent involvement, child voice, continuity, team assessment, quality of learning stories, consistency of learning stories and prioritization of learning stories.

The category parent involvement includes:

*Information sharing.* Assessment information gathered by teachers clearly shows the skills, attributes and knowledge that children are learning. This information is well documented and shared with parents. [R11]

*Parental contribution.* Parents frequently contribute to their children’s portfolios and share their aspirations with teaching staff. [R04]

The category child voice refers to an element of learning stories:

The use of the child’s voice is well developed in learning stories and next steps are regularly identified. [R10]

The category continuity relates to a function of learning stories claimed by the ERO:

Children’s portfolios show clear continuity of learning and development. [R06]

The category team assessment reflects the ECE settings’ team approach to assessment perceived by ERO:

[Teachers] record high quality assessments, regularly meet to share their knowledge of children and develop program that recognize children’s identified interests and learning needs. [R11]

The category quality of learning stories reflects ERO’s intention to standardize learning stories:

There are some examples of high quality learning stories within portfolios which are effectively used by teachers to plan programs … Learning stories are used to document outcomes from the center program … These learning stories are strongly linked to Te Whariki and individual children’s learning dispositions. They often reflect parent and child voice along with a bicultural dimension. [R02]

Teachers have worked hard to develop assessment processes that notice, recognize and value what children are learning. A useful next step for teachers is to broaden and deepen learning stories to respond more effectively to children’s ongoing learning and progress. [R04]

The category consistency of learning stories reflects ERO’s intention to make learning stories a predominant tool of assessment:

Area for improvement: Making consistent use of the system to document children’s interests. [R10]

The centre director has clarified expectations for assessment. She has provided sound guidance for teachers in achieving greater consistency in the quality of the learning stories. [R02]

The category prioritization of learning stories refers to ERO’s comments for the assessment section of the report being solely about learning stories:

Realistic expectations have been developed for the recording of learning stories which are regularly monitored by center management. [R10]

Recommendation: The coordinator continues with plans to access kei tua o te pae [Ministry of Education 2004, 2007, 2009] professional development for this center. [R06]

An effective and manageable system for documenting assessment and planning has been developed and implemented in the center. Whole staff professional development in assessment and planning through learning stories was undertaken. [R10]

Teachers observing the significant learning that is occurring and recording this in narrative learning stories. [R07]
Discussion

When addressing how a child is assessed, all three stakeholder groups shared these categories – parent–teacher communication, listening to the child, and progression. Nevertheless, each of the three categories had a particular meaning to the ERO. For parent–teacher communication, the practitioners emphasized that they needed information from the parents on the child’s learning at home, and the parents relied on information from the teachers on the child’s learning in the ECE setting. In comparison, parent involvement in the assessment of learning was rather narrowly defined by the ERO – sharing the learning stories with the parents (R11) and inviting parents to contribute to the learning stories such as completing the ‘parent voice’ column (R4). In the ERO’s terms, parent involvement in assessment of learning is essentially parent involvement in learning stories. For both the practitioners and parents, listening to the child refers to the adults obtaining information directly from the child to assess the child’s learning, and has a much broader meaning than the ERO concept of ‘child’s voice’ in learning stories (R10). Given the teachers’ control of the content of learning stories (Kalliala and Pramling Samuelsson 2014) and the limited language and literacy skill of the child, the ‘child voice’ column in the learning stories might be fraught with ‘inferred voice’ or ‘pseudo voice’ as conceptualized by Zhang (2015b). Also, since teachers face pressure from the ERO to generate ‘high quality learning stories’ (R02, R04) ‘consistently’ (R04), during the process of writing, it is understandable that they do not listen to the child, just as movie directors do not listen to the actors. The category progression shows another difference between the ERO and the ECE settings. Both the practitioners and parents highlighted the milestones of learning and development to be captured by a range of tools of assessment, which sounds plausible. However, it is not plausible for the ERO to claim that such milestones can be captured by comparing two or more learning stories, given the anecdotal nature and limited frequency of learning stories (R06).

The category team assessment was shared by the practitioners and the ERO. While the practitioners referred to team assessment as a collaborative approach to a wide range of assessment practices, ‘team assessment’ described by the ERO seemed to be confined to the production of learning stories, given that learning stories were the only assessment tool it mentioned. Then the question arises: Is a learning story the product of a team or an individual? It is reality that an individual teacher, rather than a team, writes each of the many learning stories. As a matter of fact, a learning story is rarely a product of a team, as a typical line used in many learning stories denotes, ‘Alex, I noticed that you …’ ‘rather than ‘Alex, we noticed that you …’. Although the individual teacher may consult colleagues before, during and after completion of a learning story, it is clear that the learning story is essentially not a product of team effort. In this sense, team assessment mentioned in the ERO reports is not as pertinent as that of the practitioners.

Due to the influence of the official sample learning stories (Ministry of Education 2004, 2007, 2009), the NZ version of learning stories is quite uniform across the ECE settings in both format and production process, and this might have been the reason why the participants did not provide details of what their learning stories were like and how the learning stories had been written. Instead, the participants expressed their stances on learning stories as an assessment tool. Strength of learning stories perceived by the practitioners was limited (i.e. liked by the parent), but the practitioners addressed quite a few types of limitation to learning stories (i.e. subjective, selective, time-consuming and superficial). The parents perceived
more strength of learning stories (i.e. liked by the child, colourful, memory laden, involving the child and linked to Te Whāriki) and fewer limitations to learning stories (i.e. unsubstantial, time-consuming). None of the participants touched on a major feature of learning stories claimed in the learning stories discourse – the construction of learner identity (Carr and Lee 2012), reflecting a gap between the learning stories rhetoric and the practice. Although most of the limitations to learning stories addressed by the participants are similar to those of pedagogical documentation (Emilson and Pramling Samuelsson 2014; Kalliala and Pramling Samuelsson 2014), the limitations ‘superficial’ (T07) and ‘unsubstantial’ (P10) apply to learning stories only. The reason might be twofold. First, the gist of learning stories (e.g. learner identity, NRR) had yet to be thoroughly implemented by the practitioners to produce more in-depth and substantial learning stories, which is not an easy job, given that learning stories are already time-consuming. Second, since pedagogical documentation includes a range of ways of documenting learning, even though an assessment based on any particular way is superficial and unsubstantial, synthesis of the data from a range of ways may enhance the depth of assessment substantially. Learning stories lack such synthesis of compound data. In this sense, for an assessment to be ‘substantial’, learning stories must be used along with other forms of assessment rather than be used alone. The category multiple tools contributed by the practitioners corroborates this reasoning. Over half of the practitioners stated that learning stories should not be treated as the only assessment tool (M05, T04, M01). Some parents seemed to endorse the reasoning implicitly, given their belief that learning stories were ‘unsubstantial’ (P10) and that the teachers’ time spent on learning stories can be better used (P07).

In contrast, since the ERO used the two terms (learning stories and assessment of learning) interchangeably in its quality evaluation reports, its stance on learning stories seemed steadfast: learning stories and assessment of learning are the same thing. All the comments made by the ERO about the assessment of learning were relevant to learning stories only. Across almost all ERO reports and throughout all comments made by ERO on assessment of learning, learning stories was a predominant subject matter (e.g. recommended professional development in learning stories, prescribed format and quality standards of learning stories, and consistency in implementing learning stories). The ERO made no mention of any other form of assessment in any of its reports.

Apparently, the ERO’s stance was disparate from that of the practitioners and parents. Then a question arises: Which stance should prevail? To answer this question, it is not worthwhile to weigh up the strengths and limitations of learning stories. The point is, as articulated by Zhang (2015a, 73), ‘regardless of the many strengths of the Learning Story methodology, Learning Stories alone are not adequate … early childhood education assessment should be carried out in a range of ways and should not rely on one single method’. The ERO reports were sending the message that learning stories alone constitutes and substantiates assessment of learning.

The discord between what the practitioners said in this study and what the ERO found and reported is intriguing. Apparently, the main reason is the ERO’s preference for learning stories over all other forms of assessment. The preference used to be explicit and has now become implicit with the rising concerns over the effectiveness of learning stories (Blaiklock 2008, 2011). Another reason could be related to the ECE settings’ ‘strategic’ response to the ERO review, for example, due to the power imbalance in a review situation, the ECE settings might have only provided what the ERO wanted to see or hear on the review day.
Consequently, the ERO reports might have been based on filtered information. In this study, which was strictly bound by ethics principles, similar power imbalance no longer existed, and therefore, the practitioners were willing to disclose their true feelings and thoughts that might not be ‘politically correct’. Compared to the practitioners, the parents were not as explicit as the teachers with regard to whether the predominance of learning stories is legitimate, which is not surprising, given that professional knowledge is needed when tackling such a contentious issue.

One more point is worth exploring: How well placed is the ERO to include learning stories in the scope of its quality evaluation? According to the post-modern perspective on the quality of ECE settings (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 2007), quality is neither natural nor neutral, and it is just one of the many possible ‘languages of evaluation’. The notion of ‘making learning visible’ of pedagogical documentation (including learning stories) is at odds with the traditional quality assurance approach. It is necessary to pinpoint how the ERO technically assimilates learning stories into its framework of quality assurance. The ERO used the term ‘high quality learning stories’ on a number of occasions, and made it clear that certain standards were indicative of high-quality learning stories. There is a problem here: in practice, such standards or indicators of ‘high quality learning stories’ may undermine the fundamental principles of learning stories such as construction of learner identity, for example, due to the power influence of quality evaluation, the practitioners may, wittingly or unwittingly, focus on making the learning stories ‘visible’ to the ERO officers rather than the children.

In summary, both the practitioners and parents regarded learning stories as an assessment tool that had both strengths and limitations, with the practitioners stating explicitly that there are a range of other ways that are essential for assessment of learning, and learning stories should not be treated as the only, or best, way of assessing the children’s learning. In contrast, as implied in its quality evaluation reports, the ERO considered learning stories to be the only best form of assessment of learning, which is problematic both theoretically and in practice.

**Implications and conclusion**

The different stances on learning stories between the ERO and the ECE settings as found in this study uncover tensions between everyday practices and the quality assurance authority. In particular, the findings raise a question: Do learning stories play a pivotal role in the assessment of learning, or do they play a similar role to any one of the many other forms of assessment? The findings of this study add to the literature that problematizes learning stories (Blaiklock 2008, 2011) and advocate for a comprehensive approach to assessment of learning (Zhang 2015a). The study makes an original contribution, in that it is based on empirical data and makes comparisons between the practitioners, parents and ERO within the same context on their perspectives on assessment of learning. The study not only alerts the ECE sector to the tensions, but also delineates the sources and nature of the tensions.

While the findings may help the ERO to reflect on and review their current way of reviewing assessment of learning in the ECE settings, it is difficult to make any meaningful change to the current practice. One reason is that, due to many years of ‘being tied to’ learning stories, both the ERO and the ECE settings in NZ lack expertise in alternative forms of assessment. Before alternatives are ready for implementation, it seems that the learning stories system is going to continue to dominate. It is time for practitioners, researchers and quality assurance...
authority to take action and start exploring the alternative forms of assessment, which should be better achieved through collaborative action research.

In conclusion, this study confirms the hypothesis that practitioners and parents do not truly embrace the ERO approach to assessment of learning, implicitly or explicitly, and therefore implies that the dispute between the ECE service and the ERO as reported in Hamilton (2014) is not an isolated incident but just the tip of the iceberg. The study provides empirical evidence that learning stories are not the only ‘best practice’ in assessment of learning (Ministry of Education 2004). The study provides further justification for a comprehensive approach to assessment of learning advocated by Zhang (2015a), and necessitates further research that explores a range of forms of assessment of learning which can replace or supplement the currently predominant learning stories approach.

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**References**


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Reggio Children: Reggio Emilia Italy.


