Exploring Perceptions of Saudi in-placement Early Childhood Students on the Assessment Approach of Learning Stories in Saudi Arabia's Early Childhood Settings

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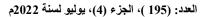## Shatha Abdullah Mosaad Alfayez

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Abstract:

Early childhood education has become a focus of government policy across the world. Part of the present increased interest in early childhood education has been a focus on curriculum frameworks and socio/cultural methods of assessment. Currently, New Zealand has emerged as a world leader in early childhood education, and observation and assessment techniques, developed in New Zealand, have become an international focus of research and pedagogic practice. One exemplar practice to have emerged from research in New Zealand is the assessment of children's learning called Learning Stories. This present research explored the introduction of Learning Stories into Saudi Arabia and investigated the potential of Learning Stories as an assessment tool for early childhood practitioners in the context of Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: early childhood; Learning Stories; observation; assessment; Saudi Arabia

تصورات طلاب الطفولة المبكرة حول نهج التقييم لتعلم القصص بالمملكة العربية السعودية

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المستخلص

أصبح التعليم في مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة محط اهتمام السياسات الحكومية في جميع أنحاء العالم، وقد انصب التركيز في مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة على أطر المناهج وطرق التقييم الاجتماعية/الثقافية المتبعة، وقد برزت نيوزيلندا حاليًا كتجربة عالمية رائدة في تعليم الطفولة المبكرة، وأصبحت تقنيات المراقبة والتقييم التي تم تطويرها في نيوزيلندا، محورًا دوليًا للبحث والممارسة التربوية، وتمثلت إحدى الممارسات النموذجية التي ظهرت من البحث في نيوزيلندا في تقييم تعلم الأطفال المسمى "قصص التعلم". ومن ثم، عمد البحث الحالي إلى استقصاء سبل توظيف قصص التعلم في المملكة العربية السعودية وجدوى الاعتماد عليها كأداة تقييم لممارسي الطفولة المبكرة في سياق المملكة العربية السعودية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الطفولة المبكرة، قصص التعلم، الملاحظة، تقييم، المملكة العربية السعودية.

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Introduction

Preschool education in Saudi Arabia has a more recent history than that of public education in Saudi Arabia. It is non-formal and includes day-care centres, nurseries, and preschool centres. There has been concern that different training backgrounds have created teachers with vastly different understandings of their role, children's needs, and the objectives of the centres in which they work. Several research studies investigated the issue of preschool teachers' education and training, and concluded that there is a massive need for in-service training resources and programs for preschool teachers (Al-Ameel, 2002; Al-Noaim, 1996; Mahdly, 2001). In Saudi Arabia the first goal of early childhood education is to celebrate the nature of the children and encourage their development in all domains (cognitive, physical, social and emotional). The education system in the last few years has been trying to shift the curriculum and teaching practices from traditional methods—which are teacher-centred and non-interactive— to newer more child-centred practices. The present research was designed to help address Saudi Arabia's issues in regard to preschool teacher quality by developing in-service material for teachers so they can share an understanding of their role and children's needs and to prepare new students of early childhood teaching to be professionally ready, on graduation, to work with children. This study also supports the Saudi government's aims of shifting the curriculum and teaching practices from traditional methods to newer ones (Al-Ameel, 2002). This study has examined in-placement university students' experiences in implementing teaching and learning strategies in Australia and observed how these strategies, namely Learning Stories, have been adapted as new approaches in Saudi Arabia. I believe this study has the potential to contribute to the enhancement of early childhood education in Saudi Arabia and has implications for the knowledge economy of Saudi Arabia.

The importance of early childhood development has been noted by economists, behavioural scientists, educators, neuroscientists, and biologists. For example, Young (2002) said that the economist, Fogel, who received the Nobel Prize for economics in 1993, was a strong proponent of quality early childhood development because of its major impact on quality of life and health and education outcomes. Young also believes that early childhood education could affect children's learning, particularly their literacy and mathematics skills. Early childhood education is an important stage in the child's development.

It gives the child the opportunity to engage in play groups and interact with other children and teachers. These experiences help the child to develop social skills and can even help to deal with some challenging behaviours. For example, it is common for preschool children to display aggressive behaviours. However, these challenging behaviours tend to disappear in the years between preschool and elementary school as children are socialised by parents, teachers and other children (Haapasalo & Tremblay, 1994).

Internationally, curricula for early childhood are quite new (Hewes, 2005). Ten years ago curricula for preschool only existed in a few countries, though guidelines have been in place since Froebel's time in the 1840s (Hewes, 2005). However, since 2009 early childhood guidelines had become more common. Curricula for early childhood education are also varied in their goals, objectives and assessment (Oberheumer, 2005). There are a number of national programs such as the Swedish (Lpfö) curriculum and the New Zealand (Te Whäriki) framework as well as preschool programs such as the American High/Scope and the Italian Reggio Emilia approach (Samuelsson, Sheridan & Williams, 2006). The most noticeable feature of all these curricula is that the child is described as an active child who is communicative and interested in the surrounding world. The High/Scope program is based on Piaget's theory about the structure of the intellect and the gradual change related to the age of the child (Rye, Smebye, &Hundeide, 1987). Children create their own knowledge within a combination of biological development and social experiences and teachers are responsible for supporting children through their development. In the Reggio Emilia programs the child is seen as competent, active and a critical member of the group. There is an emphasis on the child's rights rather than their needs (Samuelsson et al., 2006). Children are involved in the educational process and they question and develop theories and meaning in interplay with the surrounding world in a continuous process (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999). The Reggio Emilia philosophy is based upon the following principles:

- children must be in charge of the direction of their learning
- children will learn through experiences of touching, moving, listening, seeing, and hearing

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- children will interact with other children and with material items
- children must have ways and opportunities to express themselves (Cadwell, 2002).

The Swedish curriculum emphasises that the responsibility of preschool is to give children the opportunity to develop (Samuelsson et al., 2006). The Te Whäriki program is:

> … influenced by the Māori human development theory and ideology. This means a deeper respect for the life force of the universe, where everything is interconnected, and a learning theory related to a Vygotskyan perspective with the social context as forceful indicator for learning and development. (Samuelsson et al., 2006, p. 16)

All these curricula are agreed on the importance of the parents' voice; and this has been recognised since the time of Froebel (Hewes, 2001). The Reggio Emilia pedagogy says that children must know the power of their own thoughts and how they can affect their reality. This reflects a socially constructive perspective which includes parents. Action and group socialisation are important (Rinaldi, 1993). In the Swedish curriculum document we can see a qualitative change in the relationship between parents and early childhood education. In 2009 we can see parental participation as making an equal contribution to children's learning and development (Pramling-Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2004). In New Zealand the link between the family and preschool has been very strong. This link became one of the bases in New Zealand's first national early childhood curriculum, Te Whäriki (New Zealand Ministry of Education (NZMOE), 1996).

Early childhood education has become one of the most important education areas to study. Part of the present increased interest in early childhood education has been a focus on curriculum frameworks and sociocultural methods of assessment. Currently, New Zealand is a world leader in early childhood education. Many studies and much research has established the importance of different areas of early childhood education; for example, teaching in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms (McNaughton, Lai, McDonald, &Farry, 2004). One of the most innovative practices that has emerged from the New Zealand research is the assessment of children's learning. Several studies have been done in the field of assessment. For example, the article, "*Trust your own observations: assessment of*

reader and tutor behaviour in learning to read in English and Mäori"
by Glynn and McNaughton (2002), has supported the New Zealand
approach. However, the most comprehensive study of assessment
occurred in 1995 when the Project for Assessing Children's
Experiences—a research project with the Ministry of Education—was
designed to recognise some key outcomes from the New Zealand
curriculum to work with practitioners to develop a variety of
assessment ideas and procedures that would be helpful for them when
working with young children. The focus age group for this project was
3- and 4-year-olds (Carr et al., 1999). The project also took the view
that: "Assessment is the tail that wags the curriculum dog. If we want
to see real curriculum reform, we must simultaneously achieve reform
of assessment practices" (Bredekamp&Rosegrant, 1992, p. 29).

The framework of outcomes for assessment to emerge from the
New Zealand research study was described in the project as a
"Learning Story" framework (Carr et al., 1999). The research
presented in this thesis was interested in this new assessment approach
called Learning Stories. Learning Stories are based on the learning
narratives of Professor Margaret Carr from Waikato University in New
Zealand (Carr et al., 2000). Carr was interested in how teachers could
assess and track children's learning in the early years in a way that
included learning dispositions and avoided the pitfalls of over-formal
methods, while being helpful for practitioners, interesting for families
and supportive of learners (Carr, 2001).

As an early childhood aassistant professor in Saudi Arabia, I
decided to introduce the new assessment approach of Learning Stories
to early childhood university students in Saudi Arabia. The focus was
on how to teach and educate/train early childhood university students
in observation practices and the use of Learning Stories. The aim was
to see what difference this new approach would make to students'
practice. There appeared to be no research studies in this area at the
time so the research went into uncharted territory. A descriptive study
was planned to examine the responses of early childhood students in
Saudi Arabia to this new Learning Stories approach. The research
strategy was based on focus groups with participants.

Background to this research

This research is based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory
(Fleer, 2003a;Rogoff, 2003;Vygotsky, 1978), which focuses on the
social context of the child. Vygotsky (1978) believed that the social

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context influences more than attitudes and beliefs. It has a deep influence on how and what the child will think (Bodrova& Leong, 2007). Many psychologists and researchers have been interested in Vygotsky's theories (Bruner, 1985; Cole & Scribner, 1973; Rogoff, 1991; Tharp &Gallimore, 1988; Wertsch, 1991).

Learning Stories, previously mentioned as New Zealand's model of assessment, is based on this sociocultural approach, which views learning as being social and occurring in a cultural context. The contextual nature of this approach led me to believe that a Learning Stories assessment approach would be able to be adapted to the Saudi culture and the Arabic language. This proved to be the case and the students' observations and recorded stories gave excellent insights into Saudi children's learning experiences and contextual knowledge. The Learning Stories assessment approach helped the participant teachers in Saudi preschools deal with the children as individuals who have different backgrounds and different abilities and needs, but are also part of a group, a culture and a society. However, Learning Stories also presented the participants with some practical challenges, such as the time and effort that Learning Stories require.

The New Zealand early childhood curriculum framework became compulsory for funded early childhood programs in April 1998 (Carr et al., 1999). In 1996 the New Zealand Ministry of Education (1996) published a national early childhood curriculum for children aged birth to 5 years for Aotearoa New Zealand, popularly known by its short title *Te Whäriki*(the full title is *Te Whäriki: He WhärikiMātaurangamōngāMokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum*). Five strands shape the outcomes for children: belonging, wellbeing, exploration, communication and contribution. These strands are summarised at the beginning of the document as aspirations for lifelong learners—for children "to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society" (NZMOE, 1996, p. 9).

The use of stories is not confined to New Zealand. Witherell and Noddings (1991, p. 280) claim: "Finally stories are powerful research tools. They provide us with a picture of real people in real situations, struggling with real problems … They invite us to speculate on what might be changed and to what effect".

The Learning Stories method captures the context of the learning environment that appears to enable or constrain learning.

Learning Stories are not the same as case studies or running records about children—they are narratives or stories and they need to be a good tale. There are usually three parts to a Learning Story: first, the actual story about the child's learning; second, an analysis that highlights the learning that the child is experiencing; and third, the opportunities and possibilities for the child to develop their strengths and interests further (Carr, 2001).

When researching literature I was interested in looking at some of the "child study" researchers where child observation was a basis for planning. In early childhood education many researchers use observation for their data source, as detailed in the following publications: "*Not the same kind of leaders: four young children's unique ways of influencing others*" (Lee, Recchia, & Shin, 2005); "*A case study of an early childhood teacher's perspective on working with English language learners*" (Lee, Butler, &Tippins, 2007); and "*Transition from nursery to primary school*" (Bartholomew &Gustaffson, 1997). In order to gain a better and deeper understanding of the child's learning and development and design a better educational environment, these studies used naturalistic observations and/or video-taped observations. This latter method is becoming increasingly popular for program planning and research. Using these ideas the research design was based on similarities between early childhood beliefs in Saudi Arabia, New Zealand, and Australia to ensure that the proposed changes to observation and assessment would be scaffolding on existing knowledge and therefore have relevance.

1.3 What are Learning Stories?

Learning Stories are based on the learning narratives of Professor Margaret Carr from Waikato University in New Zealand (Carr et al., 2000). Carr defines Learning Stories as a type of documented assessment narrative that highlights dispositions for learning connected to the early childhood curriculum (Carr, 2001).

There are two vital features of Learning Stories that have enabled them to become cultural tools: they utilise storytelling strategies, and they spotlight the children's capabilities rather than their weaknesses. Therefore, they are based on understanding, skills and attitudes (Carr, 2001). "Exemplars are examples of assessments that make visible learning that is valued so that the learning

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community (children, families, whānau, teachers, and others) can foster ongoing and diverse learning pathways" (NZMOE, 2004, p. 3).

Learning Stories have three major essentials:

1. They start with a narrative observation.
2. They contain a formal template for analysis of the learning related to the narrative.
3. They provide guidance for future learning experience.

Learning Stories can have multiple perspectives:

- the teacher's voice
- the child's voice
- the parent's voice
- voices of other children.

When analysing the learning that happens for the children, we not only look at the child's physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual development, we also concentrate on the child's learning dispositions. There are five domains of learning disposition of interest:

- taking an interest
- being involved
- persisting with difficulty
- expressing an idea or a feeling
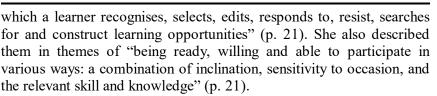- taking responsibility.

Each of these developmental domains and learning dispositions need to be looked at in three parts: being ready, being willing, and being able. The Learning Stories system will go through four stages: describing, discussing, documenting, and deciding. It is a folder that has its contents gradually built up with evidence of learning and development of the child. This evidence can be:

- written observations
- photographs of the child participating in different activities
- examples of their 'work', for example a picture they have drawn
- notes that have been made and any other relevant information (Carr, 2001).

Learning dispositions are defined by Carr (2001) as "situated learning strategies plus motivation—participation repertoires from

which a learner recognises, selects, edits, responds to, resist, searches for and construct learning opportunities" (p. 21). She also described them in themes of "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).

This storied approach as a child assessment is an advance on what has been considered sound practice in child observation, which has played a major part in the early childhood curriculum since the 19th century (Brosterman, 1997). In her many accounts of teaching, Paley (1991) has confirmed that children always draw on stories to express who they are and who they would like to be. While Paley's motives for using storytelling have nothing to do with assessment, her approach gave her important knowledge of children, and she used her observations as a powerful research tool.

Carr et al. (2001) claim that it is the logic of the familiar, together with the emotional demand of storying that helps attract children and families into the assessment process when Learning Stories are used. Reading a story about yourself (if you are a child) or about "my child" (if you are a parent) is compelling. Learning Stories make sense and attract a range of audiences.

Early childhood assessment methods in Saudi Arabia

McAfee and Leong (2002) stated that the importance of assessments in early childhood education emanates from three codes: the first code is about early learning; the second code is about the episodic course of development in any given child and the enormous variability among young children in background and preparation for school; and the third code is about the central role of adult responsiveness to their healthy cognitive and emotional development.

Saudi preschools differ in the assessment they use for the children's learning. Some preschools use portfolios—the teacher is expected to make a portfolio for every child in his/her class to show the development of each child through the year and to assess his/her learning. The portfolio contains some work that the child produced and the teacher's comments about the child's development and the parents' comments (Alhariri, 2002).

Alhabib and Alholy (2009) documented three methods of early childhood assessment applied by Saudi centres. Rating scales is one of

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the methods that been used in Saudi Arabia which is a number of sentences that describe a behaviour that the child has according to special aspects. Some preschools are applying checklists, which have some sentences about behaviour or an activity that can help the teacher to assess the child's development. Checklists are similar to rating scales, the difference being that the rating scales show how many times a child's particular behaviour occurred whereas checklists show if the child's particular behaviour occurred without showing the number of times. Recently, anecdotal records appeared in the Saudi early childhood assessment process as a modern method. It is a note where the teacher writes about the child's behaviour in a special incident (Alhabib & Alholy, 2009). The early childhood education system in Saudi Arabia needs an assessment method that attains inclusiveness, continualness, objectivity and participation (Alhabib & Alholy, 2009): inclusiveness means the assessment process needs to cover all the developmental areas of the child; continualness means that the assessment process needs to be done continually; objectivity means the assessment process needs to be based on educational and psychological tools and ways; and participation means the assessment process needs to be shared by the teachers, the principal and the parents.

Teachers are not familiar with the alternative assessment evaluation techniques along with absences of structured training in educational assessment. Nassif (2007) investigated the assessment practices in Saudi Arabia, particularly the classroom assessment method in Jeddah city. The study was conducted in 18 public and private preschools. She found that out of 197 teachers, 54 per cent held a diploma or less and 46 per cent held a bachelor's degree. Nassif pointed out that the implementation of new assessment methods did not take into account teachers' training needs. She documented that a preschool culture is mostly influenced by a unified preschool curriculum, which applies very little attention to classroom assessment, coupled with lack of knowledge, skills and confidence in the use of many assessment techniques.

Significant plans for early childhood education in Saudi Arabia

The recent years experienced a tremendous focus from the Ministry of Education on the area of early childhood education. The

Ministry is working on several projects to develop the early childhood education and to solve and deal with some of the problems that face this development. One of the biggest projects is King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Public Education Development Project (Tatweer) (Al-Dabass, 2013). The project aims to develop all levels of education starting from preschool and finishing by high school. The three main goals for this project in the area of early childhood education are: to create a practical national early childhood curriculum; to develop and train preschool teachers, supervisors and administrators; and to encourage the private sector to invest and help in the development of early childhood education in Saudi Arabia (Al-Dabass, 2013).

In planning for future development the Ministry of Education, along with "Tatweer", began working with The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (Al-Dabass, 2013). The cooperation resulted in forming the project of developmental principles of early childhood education in Saudi Arabia. There were also two projects that were founded under the umbrella of "Tatweer"—the first project is developing a national preschool curriculum, and the second project is developing the profession (Al-Dabass, 2013). Hopefully the "Tatweer Project" will solve the three main problems that face early childhood education development in Saudi Arabia—providing preschools with buildings that are appropriate for preschool purposes, training preschool teachers, especially in the country areas that don't have teachers with an early childhood background, and finally focusing on quality in the development process (Al-Dabass, 2013; Tatweer, 2013).

In order to solve these problems the Ministry started using the early childhood environment rating scale (ECERS) to evaluate the preschools from all aspects. Moreover, most of the teachers who work now started working in preschools a long time ago, in the early stages of establishing Saudi preschools. At that time, very few held a degree in early childhood education. Therefore, the government started employing preschool teachers with bachelor degrees or diplomas in any field of knowledge, not specifically early childhood, so a preschool teacher might have a science background or a history background. As a result, most of the preschool teachers now have no theoretical or practical training in the field of early childhood education. To deal with this situation the Ministry established early childhood training centres. In addition, the Ministry is trying to encourage investments in the area of preschools by working on a

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project called the "school allowance project"—this project suggests that the government support every child's right to attend at preschool level by contributing a voucher for every Saudi child that parents can present at any private preschool. This project might help many parents with the expense of private preschools. However, the project is under study by the Ministry of Finance. There are also suggestions a board concerned with academic evaluating and confirming be established. The aim of this board is to build united principles regarding evaluation, investigation and development for all educational levels starting from preschool level, in both government and private sectors (Al-Dabass, 2013).

The development plan is to expand the number of preschools by 50 per cent (Al-Dabass, 2013). Al-Fayez, deputy minister of education in charge of women's affairs, announced that 73 preschools were supposed to be established by the year 2010, with a total of 2019 classes (Al-Sakran, 2009). Faour (2010) and Al-Dabass (2013) said that in Saudi Arabia there are principles regarding the number of children in the class of one teacher. They both specified a ratio of 1:10 for children ages 3–4 years, and one teacher per class for 12 children ages 4–6 years. (If the class has a second teacher, then there can be more than 12 children.)

Objectives of the research

Since this Learning Stories method was developed, many researchers (e.g. Needham, 2007; Smith, 1999) have been interested in looking at different concepts of the approach, such as the benefits of using Learning Stories (Carr et al., 1999), how to apply Learning Stories in the classroom, the role of the teacher in Learning Stories and how to use Learning Stories to plan a good learning program for each child (Carr, 2001). However, through my preliminary reading and researching, I found nothing about how to teach about Learning Stories in the university and how to train students to become early childhood teachers who use Learning Stories as an assessment approach professionally. This was the first reason I decided to do my research in this particular area. The second is that I came to Australia to seek new educational concepts and techniques to take back with me to my country (Saudi Arabia). This research allowed me to learn about Learning Stories and provided me with strategies to train teachers to tailor this approach for use in Saudi Arabia's early childhood settings.

The main aims of this research were to:

1. Learn more about teaching the assessment approach of Learning Stories.
2. Introduce a new assessment approach to Saudi Arabia's early childhood education.
3. Introduce Learning Stories to in-placement university students.
4. Examine the participants' implementation of Learning Stories.
5. Evaluate the impact that Learning Stories might have on early childhood settings in Saudi Arabia.

Research questions

I discovered that in Australia, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory is dominant in the early childhood field and therefore the New Zealand assessment approach of Learning Stories is very popular (Fleer & Richardson, 2004). I was interested in knowing more about this assessment approach and investigating the methods of teaching and training early childhood teachers in order to introduce these ideas in Saudi Arabia. At present early childhood students in Saudi Arabia are familiar with observations, but analysis is not developed (Kashkary& Robinson, 2006).

The research questions were:

1. How do the participants understand and implement the assessment approach of Learning Stories?
2. What are the participants' reflections about the assessment approach of Learning Stories?
3. How could this approach impact on practices in a Saudi Arabian preschool?
4. Are Learning Stories an appropriate assessment tool for Saudi Arabian early childhood education students?

1.7 Methodology

1.7.1 Theoretical orientation

As stated earlier, Learning Stories have a base in sociocultural theory. Current conceptualisations of sociocultural theory draw heavily on the work of Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky states:

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then

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inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals. (p. 57)

Vygotsky's theoretical contributions to the development of curricula and teaching strategies are widely known among educational theorists. Vygotsky devised a sociocultural theory that subsequently influenced the development of the constructivist movement. Although Vygotsky's contributions to the field of education are apparent, what has not been specifically addressed is how the particulars of his theoretical framework helped shape the development of constructivist curricula (Jaramillo, 1996).

According to Tharp and Gallimore (1988):

This view [the sociocultural perspective] has profound implications for teaching, schooling, and education. A key feature of this emergent view of human development is that higher order functions develop out of social interaction. Vygotsky argues that a child's development cannot be understood by a study of the individual. We must also examine the external social world in which that individual life has developed ... Through participation in activities that require cognitive and communicative functions, children are drawn into the use of these functions in ways that nurture and "scaffold" them. (pp. 6–7)

Socioculturally oriented writers have described learning as appropriated (Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996) in authentic cultural locations, defining these as communities of practice (Carr, 2001). Learning Stories are a research tool that considers the context, location and people involved as all playing a part in learning (Carr et al., 2001). In keeping with this view of the significance of daily experience and relationships within a particular context, data was collected using a focus group (the university in-placement students) in Saudi Arabia.

The method

This research was a qualitative, subjective, interpretive research project. I used a focus group as a method to collect data. I also conducted training workshop sessions in how to implement a Learning Stories approach.

The setting

The study was located in Saudi Arabia. As in Australia and New Zealand, Saudi students have been trained to use observations and analyse these in relation to developmental areas. This made it a developmental step for the Saudi student to adapt to the new Learning Stories approach as they already shared preliminary knowledge with their Australian and New Zealand counterparts.

The training course was delivered to students at the King Saud University.

The Saudi preschools divide children into classes according to the age of the child. The classes have both boys and girls at the preschool level. Every class has play corners and an open area, usually in the middle, where the children sit in a circle every morning. Every class has one teacher. The school has a big playground with some swings, slides and bicycles.

The participants

The participants were myself, the Saudi university in-placement students. To collect the data I:

- observed Australian centres (this provided background on the use of Learning Stories)
- prepared workshops on Learning Story methodology (previous research has been carried out in this area) (Alfayez, 2008)
- presented workshops on assessment and evaluation and also Learning Stories
- interviewed students—focus group.

Colleagues at King Saud University were asked to recommend and approach appropriate students for the research. The students were asked to attend the workshops I delivered and to apply the new approach to assessment and evaluation to their practicum work. They implemented Learning Stories in their classes and reported on the experience in focus group sessions.

Data collection

1. A focus group with the students was held at the end of the course after they had finished their placements. The discussion took place around the new assessment approach they had implemented. The students' work was discussed. Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 365) state that

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Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1956) coined the term "focus group" to apply to a situation in which the interviewer asks group members very specific questions about a topic after considerable research has already been completed. Kreuger (1988) defines a focus group as a "carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions in a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment" (p. 18).

The focus group was used as an evaluation tool and to collect data at the same time. According to Patton (1990), focus group interviews are necessary in the evaluation process: as part of a needs assessment, during a program, at the end of the program, or months after the completion of a program, to collect understanding of the outcome of that program.

The focus group discussion was recorded and transcribed. Some were translated.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data of the focus group. Thematic analysis is an approach that involves the creation and application of "codes" to data. The "data" being analysed might take any number of forms—an interview transcript, field notes, policy documents, photographs, video footage (Miles &Hurberman, 1994). This was in keeping with a sociocultural approach where actions are seen as occurring in relationships within the cultural and historical context and are grounded in everyday experiences.

Focus group analysis

This part analysed responses from the focus group conducted with 11 university in-placement students who implemented Learning Stories with the children in their classes. Five broad themes were examined.

The first theme—Note observation vs. Learning Stories— discussed the students' points of view about the differences between "note observation", the previous observation tool that they had experienced, and Learning Stories. The group agreed that Learning Stories are longer and more detailed than "note observations". They also agreed that Learning Stories focus only on the strengths of the child. The majority of the group mentioned that Learning Stories could be used with both individuals and groups. They liked that the

observation in Learning Stories is followed by an analysis and the planning of future activities. One student suggested that Learning Stories gives the opportunity for the teacher to verbally interact with the child, which will help to assess his/her language development. One student believed that Learning Stories are more accurate than "note observations" because Learning Stories are longer and more detailed.

The second theme—Rediscovering the children in my group—discussed aspects that the participant students identified as advantages of using Learning Stories. The group agreed that Learning Stories helped them improve and implement the use of open-ended questions with the children. They also agreed that Learning Stories helped the teacher to discover the child's interests and plan future activities according to these interests. Moreover, the group agreed that using Learning Stories and sharing them with the children would help to improve children's confidence and self-esteem. Some students argued that analysing the Learning Story helped expand their knowledge and practices. Some students thought that Learning Stories assisted them to build relationships with the children that were based on understanding and trust. One student used Learning Stories as an assessment tool and as a feedback tool to assess her teaching.

The third theme—What the child can do OR what the child can't do—led to a debate about the Learning Stories approach focusing on what the child can do instead of what the child can't do. Most of the group agreed that this approach was beneficial, however, two students believed that an assessment and observation tool should look at both the strengths and the weaknesses of the child.

The fourth theme—Time and effort—discussed aspects of Learning Stories that the participant students did not like. The students agreed that Learning Stories took a long time and great effort to put into the written form. The group also agreed that it was hard to implement Learning Stories in the group because of time constraints and it was hard to leave other children unsupervised while observing a child. Nine of the students struggled with taking photos of the children while observing them; they thought that Learning Stories were not practical as an assessment and observation tool. Two students thought that it would be better to make the story part of the Learning Stories shorter, or even replace the story with notes and comments.

The fifth theme—The future observation and assessment tool—discussed what kind of assessment and observation techniques

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the participant students would plan to use in the future. Most of the students indicated an interest in using Learning Stories in the future. Four students said that they would love to use Learning Stories under appropriate conditions. Four students said that they would use another observation tool, but still use Learning Stories as a support tool. Two students said that they would use "note observation" as a formal assessment tool and use Learning Stories as a support tool. One student said that she would use neither "note observation" nor Learning Stories in the.

Conclusion

It would appear then that the research question can be answered by saying that the Learning Stories assessment approach could have a positive impact on Saudi early childhood practices. Saudi teachers were able to implement the approach. They had mainstream concerns that have been encountered also in New Zealand and Australia. Many advantages of the approach were identified and some fundamental issues about the role of observation and education emerged in the discussion of strengths and weakness.

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