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“It’s a little tricky”: Collaborating with families to assess the learning dispositions of infants and toddlers

Maria Rose Cooper

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education at The University of Auckland, 2012
Abstract

*Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996a), the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, promotes learning dispositions as a key learning outcome, which teachers are expected to assess. This thesis argues that *Te Whāriki*’s principle of involving families and communities in assessment is challenging to implement, particularly in centres guided by Gerber’s (1979) *Resources for Infant Educarers* (RIE) philosophy. This challenge emanates from competing tensions in the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings, and related views of teaching and learning, of RIE and *Te Whāriki*. This thesis investigates how teachers in a centre guided by RIE understand the imperative to involve families when assessing the dispositional learning of infants and toddlers.

An interpretive, qualitative, case study methodology was employed to gather data from semi-structured interviews with five teachers, a range of centre documentation, and researcher field notes. Claxton and Carr’s (2004) sociocultural notion of a potentiating environment informed the thematic analysis. Themes that emerged from the findings include the centre and home as disposition-enhancing environments, the role of the teacher in fostering dispositions, and the nature of teachers’ collaboration with families in assessment. The findings were interpreted using Carr’s (2002b) sociocultural notions for assessment: competence, continuity, and community.

Findings revealed RIE as a powerful influence on teachers’ views of learning dispositions, assessment, and the involvement of families, and highlighted tensions between RIE and *Te Whāriki*. RIE appeared to influence teachers to focus on particular learning dispositions consistent with RIE, limiting their attention to dispositions valued by *Te Whāriki*. RIE also influenced teachers’ conception of assessment as observation and summative documentation, limiting their ability to formatively assess dispositional learning in ways consistent with *Te Whāriki*. Finally, adopting a primary caregiving approach, which supports the implementation of RIE, was seen to influence teachers to approach assessment as an individual responsibility, limiting their ability to promote two-way partnerships with families in assessment, as per *Te Whāriki*. This thesis concludes that implementation of RIE in early childhood settings governed by *Te Whāriki* requires teachers to be critically reflective about the potential consequences on dispositional learning, assessment, and the involvement of families. Resulting implications for teaching practice, teacher education and research are discussed.
I wish to express my sincere thanks to the teachers of the participating centre for their
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Chapter one
INTRODUCTION

Partnerships between teachers and families in assessment practices are an important element of implementing the early childhood education curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996a). Furthermore, this curriculum affirms holistic learning outcomes as important for all children in New Zealand. So far, however, there has been little research exploring the problematic nature of partnering with families to assess the learning dispositions of infants and toddlers. In this thesis, I address this gap in research by adopting an interpretive, qualitative, case study methodology to investigate the ways in which one group of teachers of infants and toddlers understands families’ involvement in assessment of learning dispositions.

This thesis argues that *Te Whāriki’s* principle of involving families and communities in assessment is challenging to implement in practices guided by Gerber’s (1979) *Resources for Infant Educarers* (RIE) philosophy. This challenge emanates from competing tensions in the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings, and related views of teaching and learning, of RIE and *Te Whāriki*. This challenge is based on *Te Whāriki’s* imperative that assessment be underpinned by two-way partnerships with families and informed by families’ insights about their children. *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996a) states:

> Families should be part of the assessment… of children’s learning and development. Parents and caregivers have a wealth of valuable information and understandings regarding their children… Observations and records should be part of two-way communication that strengthens the partnership between the early childhood setting and families. (p. 30)

All licensed early childhood services are obligated to implement the national curriculum framework in practice (MoE, 1998, 2008). In mainstream settings, this is *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996a). This obligation endorses the importance for teachers to emphasise such partnerships in their assessment practices.

This chapter begins with the rationale for the research topic. The research context is then described in relation to four key areas: theoretical perspectives, *Te Whāriki* as a sociocultural curriculum, learning dispositions in early childhood education, and
context of and curriculum for infants and toddlers. Questions pertinent to the research topic and its significance are presented. Finally, an overview of the thesis is offered.

**Rationale for study**

The idea for this study arose out of my long-term interest in teacher-family relationships and children’s learning dispositions. This interest began in my role as an early childhood teacher, teaching children under three and working closely with their families. During this time, I learned that families were willing to be involved in their child’s learning, but were often unsure how. Since then, I have continued to mull over the role of the teacher, with regards to valuing families as integral to their young child’s education. Furthermore, my more recent role as a parent of three children, who have experienced early childhood education outside the home, has strengthened my desire to support families to stay connected to their child’s education.

**Research context**

Early discussions about dispositions in early childhood education occurred in the 1990s, when Katz (1993) argued for them to be a key focus in early learning. A considerable amount of literature has since been written on dispositions as a valued outcome for young children (e.g., Bertram & Pascal, 2002; Carr, 2001; Carr et al., 2009; Claxton & Carr, 2004). Common to these studies was a focus on the child’s social context, in which these dispositions are shaped and supported.

More specifically, and in relation to the present study, as chapter two will demonstrate, research has highlighted families as integral to the shaping of their children’s dispositions during the first years of life (e.g., see Carr, 2002a; Carr et al., 2009; Claxton, 2007; Dweck, 2006). However, most of these studies have focused on children aged three and over, and not on children under three; the focus of the present study. Three studies that were related to infants and/or toddlers highlighted learning dispositions as a key focus in early childhood (Bary et al., 2008; Bashford & Bartlett, 2011; Podmore & May, 2003). Yet, they did not focus on the integral role of family in shaping and supporting their children’s dispositions. At present, there appears to be no research focused on how teachers understand the involvement of families in assessing the dispositional learning of infants and toddlers, highlighting this topic as a current gap in the literature.
**Theoretical perspectives**

In line with contemporary views in early childhood, sociocultural theory underpins this study’s focus on learning dispositions, assessment, and relationships with families in assessment. From a sociocultural perspective, interactions and relationships between people, and the context in which they occur, are integral to learning (Edwards, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). Learning is, therefore, a social and participative process occurring through, and mediated by, interactive exchanges with others in social settings (Carr, 2001; Rogoff, 1998, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). From such a perspective, learning is considered in relation to its context.

An emphasis on context sits somewhat in tension with Piaget’s theory of cognitive development. Piaget proposed that learning is an individual construction, and is determined as the child progresses through sequential, age-determined stages of development (Edwards, 2005; Hedges & Cullen, 2011). Recent theoretical shifts in early childhood education toward sociocultural theory and, more recently, toward participatory learning theories, which highlight participation in families and communities (see Hedges & Cullen, 2011), appear to indicate a waning reliance on Piaget’s developmental perspective to sufficiently explain the significance of context in learning. Despite these shifts, a developmental perspective continues to inform some early childhood provision. Nonetheless, the valued learning explored in this thesis is that of learning dispositions, which is interpreted through a sociocultural perspective.

**Te Whāriki as a sociocultural curriculum**

Sociocultural theory is an important theoretical perspective underpinning *Te Whāriki*. *Te Whāriki* is informed by multiple theoretical perspectives, including Piaget’s emphasis on development and the individual. However, it is more often interpreted from a sociocultural perspective (Hedges & Cullen, 2011).

Sociocultural theory informs *Te Whāriki*’s (MoE, 1996a) approach to assessment of children’s learning in several ways. Learning to be assessed is viewed as socially and culturally mediated. Teachers who assess learning do so within their relationships with children. Finally, teachers actively seek out families’ perspectives to inform assessment practices and outcomes. Taken together, assessment in *Te Whāriki* is relationship-based and distributed across teachers and families, with the aim of supporting children’s learning over time and across contexts.
Along with the principle of family and community, assessment practices guided by *Te Whāriki* must also be underpinned by the principles of relationships, empowerment, and holistic development (MoE, 1996a, 2008). The principle of relationships recognises that learning is mediated through relationships with “people, places, and things” (p. 9). The principle of empowerment expects that the image of the child as capable and competent to learn will be upheld. Finally, the principle of holistic development assumes consideration will be given to the range of influences on each child’s learning. The child’s family is a key social influence.

For the purposes of this thesis, the term *families* will incorporate *Te Whāriki’s* reference to *communities*, unless stated otherwise. Therefore, families will refer to the significant and caring people in children’s home contexts, and may include parents, siblings, and the whānau (Māori - wider family) communities of grandparents, uncles, aunts, and/or other guardians.

**Learning dispositions in early childhood education**

Learning dispositions are an important outcome of *Te Whāriki*. In the curriculum, dispositions are described as combinations of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that encourage learning (MoE, 1996a). Based on *Te Whāriki’s* assertion that learning occurs in and between multiple settings, teachers are encouraged to broaden their view of learning dispositions to include a consideration for children’s home settings and families as influential to their development. A discussion about *Te Whāriki’s* dispositions, and others, will be presented in Chapter two.

While a variety of definitions of the term learning dispositions have been suggested elsewhere (see p. 14), the definition formulated for this thesis draws on Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory and Carr’s (2001) research on learning dispositions. Learning dispositions will refer to motivation-related participation strategies that are shaped through social and cultural experiences and employed in particular learning situations, in various contexts. The terms *learning dispositions*, *disposition-related learning*, and *dispositional learning* will be used interchangeably throughout the thesis, at times when the use of one term over the other is more appropriate.
**Context of and curriculum for infants and toddlers**

A study focused on New Zealand teachers of infants and toddlers, defined in *Te Whāriki* as children aged birth to 3 years (MoE, 1996a), is important for several reasons. One reason concerns the participation of infants and toddlers, in early childhood provision. From 2000 to 2011, enrolments of children under three in licensed early childhood services in New Zealand grew by 51%. Currently, 45,474 infants and toddlers are enrolled in early childhood provision, and at least 4% of them are under one (MoE, 2011a). These figures highlight a fast growing area in education, and indicate an increasing acceptance of children under three in formal education and care services. Teachers of infants and toddlers, therefore, will need to pay close attention to how they implement curriculum approaches for this group.

Another reason concerns international evidence of low quality care and education for infants and toddlers, as well as a general disregard for infants’ and toddlers’ learning (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2006), despite brain research asserting the importance of quality early childhood experiences to later experiences. Quality provision for infants and toddlers has been endorsed in a comprehensive literature review on the quality of early childhood education for children under three (Dalli et al., 2011). In particular, this review highlighted teachers’ “ongoing, consistent and stable relationships” (p. 13) with children and their families as an enabler of quality early childhood provision.

Yet, even with such endorsements, current Ministry regulations require only 50% of teachers teaching children under two to be qualified (MoE, 2008). This means that adults who teach infants and toddlers may not have access to recent and relevant professional knowledge regarding infant and toddler education and care or effective partnerships with families. In this study, I use the term *teacher* as I deliberately sought the views of qualified teachers, based on my argument that in order to assess learning dispositions in conjunction with families, a qualification representing professional knowledge is necessary.

Alongside theories and research that should underpin curriculum implementation, particular philosophies of care and education of infants and toddlers appear to have become prominent in the early childhood curriculum in New Zealand. Philosophy can be defined as a combination of teachers’ choices, values, knowledge, beliefs,
aspirations, and aims about teaching and learning (Cuffaro, 1995, as cited in Rodd, 1999). The teachers who agreed to participate are committed to Magda Gerber’s (1979) RIE philosophy of respect. RIE will be discussed further in Chapter three.

The research topic: its significance and questions

The main aim of this study is to investigate what teachers of infants and toddlers, in an early childhood setting in New Zealand, understand in relation to the involvement of families in assessing infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions. This topic is underpinned by strong calls for the inclusion and consideration of learning dispositions in early childhood education (e.g., Carr, et al., 2009; Katz, 1993). It is also underpinned by current requirements that teachers partner with families in relation to assessment of their children’s learning (MoE, 1996a; 2008).

It is envisaged the present study will not only contribute to the emerging dialogue surrounding the growing number of infants and toddlers attending early childhood education in New Zealand, but will help address the gap in literature available to support teachers’ focus on learning dispositions in early education. This research will also contribute to developing discussions about the importance of teachers drawing on families’ perspectives to support learning dispositions in meaningful ways. Furthermore, this research may assist teachers as they work toward meeting their professional obligations in assessment.

This study set out to investigate the following broad aim:

*How do teachers understand families’ involvement in assessment of infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions?*

Thesis overview

The overall structure of the study takes the form of six chapters including this introductory chapter, which has outlined the rationale, context, significance, and questions underpinning this study. An overview of the thesis is presented next.

Chapter two reviews a range of literature on assessment, learning dispositions, and assessment of learning dispositions. Consideration is given to literature that highlights
these notions in relation to infants and toddlers, and their families, and to literature that establishes such notions as complex.

Chapter three describes the interpretivist research paradigm and qualitative, case study methodology used in this study. Details about the research site and participants, ethical considerations, data gathering, and analysis procedures are discussed. Issues of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability are explored.

Chapter four reports the research findings, utilising the conceptual framework of Claxton and Carr’s (2004) potentiating environment. Three themes common to all teachers are identified and include the centre and home as disposition-enhancing environments, the role of the teacher in fostering learning dispositions, and the nature of collaboration with families in relation to assessment. The aims of this research will be addressed with reference to the findings.

Chapter five presents a discussion of the research findings utilising Carr’s (2002b) conceptual framework for assessment based on three notions: competence, continuity, and community, as well as relevant literature. Sociocultural theory is utilised to analyse contextual factors that might influence teachers’ understandings.

Finally, the conclusion draws upon the entire thesis, summarising and arguing the main findings, and discussing implications for teaching practice and teacher education. Furthermore, suggestions for future research are proposed.
Chapter two
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The overarching aim of this research was to explore the ways in which teachers understand the involvement of families in assessment of infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions. This chapter reviews literature related to assessment in early childhood, learning dispositions, and assessment of dispositional learning.

Assessment enhances teachers’ and families’ understandings about children’s learning. In New Zealand, early childhood teachers are guided by *Te Whāriki* to implement assessment through a sociocultural lens. Consistent with sociocultural theory, teachers should partner with families when assessing children’s learning. However, the inclusion of families in assessment has proven challenging for teachers, particularly when teachers believe families place less value on being involved (Davis, 2006).

Section one of this chapter reviews literature that describes the nature of assessment in early childhood, in order to establish that partnerships with families in assessment is problematic.

*Te Whāriki* encourages teachers to assess learning dispositions. However, assessment of learning dispositions has proven to be neither simple nor straightforward, especially when teachers approach dispositional assessment with varied views about its purpose and their role in such assessment (Turnock, 2009). Section two of this chapter will review the literature on learning dispositions in early education, in order to establish dispositions as complex constructs to assess. Following this, section three will explore the literature regarding assessment of learning dispositions, to establish that the use of a particular dispositional approach to assessment is challenging. This chapter concludes with a summary of key themes and gaps in the literature, drawn together to provide the rationale for the present study. Finally, the research questions are presented.

**Section one: Assessment in early childhood education**

In this section, the nature of assessment in early childhood education is discussed and key features of assessment are identified. Next, an overview of assessment policy and practice is given. Following this, literature relevant to teachers’ views about
partnerships with families in assessment is presented. Finally, this section concludes with a summary of key themes in the literature reviewed, relevant to this study.

**The nature of assessment in early childhood education**

A primary purpose of assessment is to inform and enhance learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Carr, 2001; Cowie, 2009). This contemporary view of assessment sees assessment, learning, and teaching as an integrated process (Carr et al., 2009; Cowie, 2009). This process is facilitated through the provision of responsive relationships in supportive learning environments where teachers notice, recognise, respond, record, and revisit individuals’ learning (Carr, 2008; Cowie & Bell, 1999; Cowie & Carr, 2009). In early childhood education, assessment is therefore relationship-based and involves balancing multiple tasks. These tasks include observation, interpretation, professional judgment, dialogue, decision-making, collaboration with families, documenting, and acting on interpretations about learning to foster learning.

**Key features of assessment**

Assessment in education is underpinned by two key purposes: formative and summative. Formative assessment involves the gathering of information about the learner and their learning, and using this information to inform decisions to support that learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Harlen, 2007). It can be planned, whereby teachers consider and implement a learning experience with the intention of assessing learning, or it can be interactive, whereby teachers notice, recognise and respond to children’s learning, as teachers and children interact (Cowie & Bell, 1999). Effective formative assessment therefore requires teachers to be knowledgeable about its significance and different forms, and to acknowledge that it is a complex task (Cowie & Bell, 1999). Significantly, formative assessment occurs mainly between teachers and learners but can be enhanced with the involvement of significant others.

Summative assessment, on the other hand, involves the gathering of summary information about the learner and their learning at a particular point in time, in order to report this information to multiple audiences (Harlen, 2007). In early childhood education, these audiences can include children themselves, teachers, families, and external agencies, for example, the Education Review Office (ERO; Carr, 2001). A key difference between formative and summative assessment lies in the use of information; however, this distinction is not always clear.
The potential to use summative information formatively and vice versa is widely debated (e.g., Harlen, 2005, Harlen & James, 1997). In early childhood education in New Zealand, formative assessment of learning is emphasised (Cowie & Carr, 2009; MoE, 2004) and commonly documented as learning stories (Carr, 2001), an interpretivist and narrative method of assessment (discussed later in this chapter). Learning stories can be viewed as formative assessment when the information about significant learning they help to gather is used to foster that learning. On the other hand, learning stories might also reflect summative assessment when the information they help to gather is used to summarise children’s learning at particular points in time, and documented to share with the learner and relevant others.

Alongside key purposes, validity is another important feature of assessment, especially in relation to complex constructs like learning dispositions. Validity is a property in assessment that provides assurance that assessment will assess what is intended (Harlen, 2007). The notion of validity is often associated with measuring the accuracy of assessment and can be applied to interpretivist methods of assessment, such as learning stories. This application involves the assessor considering the authenticity of the data gathered about learning (Crick, 2010). Authenticity involves critiquing the fairness, trustworthiness, and meaningfulness of the interpretations made about learning. It can be further enhanced through multiple discussions, observations, and observers as well as an acknowledgement that context-specific outcomes, such as learning dispositions, are influenced by a range of factors (Carr, 2001). Alongside contributing information about children’s learning at home, families can also enhance the validity of teachers’ assessment of their child’s learning dispositions, provided teachers involve them in discussions about the way their child approaches learning.

**Assessment policy and practice**

Within early childhood education, the Ministry of Education asserts the importance of families’ involvement in children’s learning and assessment in a number of policy documents. For example, *Te Whāriki* expects teachers to collaborate with families as part of their assessment practices (MoE, 1996a). The *Revised Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices in New Zealand Early Childhood Services* (DOPs; MoE, 1996b), the statement guiding the practice of the participating centre, emphasises the inclusion of families in teachers’ decisions about children and their progress. Further,
the current *Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations* (MoE, 2008) obligate teachers to involve and connect with families in assessment and curriculum.

Alongside these policy statements, assessment exemplars (*Kei tua o te pae*; MoE, 2004, 2007, 2009a) were distributed to all licensed early childhood services in New Zealand following *Te Whāriki* and DOPs (Carr, 2009). These exemplars included documentation that further supported the involvement of families and a focus on learning dispositions in assessment. However, the existence of such policies and exemplars does not guarantee that teachers’ understandings, as they relate to partnering with families to assess dispositional learning, will be influenced in significant ways. This is especially so when these resources assume teachers already have relevant knowledge about learning dispositions and effective partnerships with families in assessment. To shed light on such issues, literature about teachers’ views on partnering with families in assessment is discussed next.

**Teachers’ views about partnerships with families in assessment**

International literature (Mitchell, Wylie, & Carr, 2008; OECD, 2006; Sylva et al., 2004; Whalley & the Pen Green Centre Team, 2007), and national literature (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003) asserted that teacher-family partnerships are beneficial to children’s learning. The OECD (2001) described each partnership as “a two-way process of knowledge and information flowing freely both ways” (n.p., quoted in OECD, 2006, p. 148). The OECD, however, found that patterns of family engagement in early childhood education and care varied from country to country, revealing that teachers do not always share such understandings. In particular, these variations were seen to relate to challenges often associated with engaging families in early childhood programmes. Challenges cited included cultural, attitudinal, and linguistic barriers and a lack of time.

Similarly, a New Zealand research project investigated home-school partnerships by interviewing teachers, amongst other participants, for their views on partnerships with families in education (Bull, Brooking, Campbell, & NZCER, 2008). Bull et al. exemplified the finding that the notion of partnerships with families is problematic. First, teachers’ attitudes and beliefs about education were seen to be influential in how these partnerships played out. Second, it was established that developing effective teacher-family partnerships takes time and commitment from both parties. In contrast,
learning-focused partnerships were evident when teachers and families openly discussed children’s learning progress and assessment, and when both parties knew what their roles were in terms of supporting learning. Importantly, the study suggested that teachers need opportunities to reflect on the purposes of involving families, rather than to focus merely on the “practicalities of implementing partnership initiatives” (p. 11). Furthermore, while this research was carried out with teachers of school-age children, its findings highlight issues that are of equal importance to teachers of infants and toddlers, especially as these children must rely on their families to speak on their behalf.

Importantly, teachers’ views about their roles and responsibilities have been seen to influence the way they involve families in their child’s learning. An international study involving five European countries explored early childhood teachers’ perspectives regarding partnerships with families (Hujala, Turja, Gaspar, Veisson, & Waniganayake, 2009). Like the OECD (2006), Hujala et al. (2009) found that patterns of partnerships between teachers and families varied across countries. Significantly, it was found that how teachers viewed themselves influenced the nature of their collaboration with families. Parents were sometimes perceived as customers, rather than educational partners, when teachers emphasised early childhood provision as a care or welfare service rather than early education. Viewing families in this or similar ways has implications for the way teachers might view their roles as professionals. It also has implications for teachers’ commitment to policy initiatives asserting the importance of two-way learning-focused discussions with families, such as Te Whāriki in New Zealand early childhood settings.

Aside from these challenges in establishing partnerships, current views in early childhood education continue to endorse the fact that assessment is more effective when families are involved (Carr, 2001; ERO, 2007; Hatherly & Richardson, 2007; Whalley & the Pen Green Centre team, 2007). Similar to Bull et al. (2008), a British study utilised case study methodology to explore the nature of teachers’ partnerships with parents of children aged 3 to 5 (Bridge, 2001). Bridge asserted the home culture as integral to children’s learning and parents as influential to what children focused on in the centre. In particular, teachers were found to be active in asking families to support their child’s learning at home, resulting in enhanced continuity in children’s learning across home and centre. Nevertheless, parents raised concerns that they themselves did
not have a good understanding of assessment. This concern suggests that teachers carefully consider the ways in which they enhance families’ understandings about supporting their child’s learning. However, as with Bull et al. (2008), the study focused on children over three, rather than infants and toddlers as per my study.

Significantly, Bridge’s (2001) findings add to the issues already raised in Bull et al. (2008) and Hujala et al. (2009), that suggest teachers reflect on the purposes of involving families, their views about families, and possible consequences, as well as their commitment to policy initiatives that should underpin practices with families. Such considerations assert the complex nature of teacher-family partnerships.

In New Zealand, this complex nature was evident in the ERO’s (2007) report on the quality of assessment in 389 early childhood services across the nation. Teachers in half of the services viewed the involvement of families as difficult, with some reporting families often declined to be involved. ERO highlighted that teachers needed to do more to encourage the genuine involvement of parents and whānau in assessment of children's learning and development.

Summary
The literature reviewed thus far highlighted assessment in early childhood as a broad, relationship-based process that requires knowledge about formative assessment and ways to establish and maintain learning-focused partnerships with families. The review also established that forming partnerships with families is difficult, despite the emphasis on families in policy statements that guide assessment-related practices. Further, contextual factors such as teachers’ views about education, their roles and responsibilities, and commitment to policy statements, were likely to be influential in the way these partnerships played out.

To further clarify these issues, a review of the literature about learning dispositions as a focus in assessment, is presented next.

Section two: Learning dispositions as an educational outcome
In this section, theoretical perspectives of dispositions are presented, and learning dispositions deemed important in the early years are considered. The relevance of and progress in dispositional learning are considered. Continuity in dispositional learning
across home and centre is discussed. Then, the influences of teachers’ values and beliefs, and learning environments, on dispositional learning are considered. Finally, this section concludes with a summary of the key themes in the literature about learning dispositions, which will inform this study.

**Theoretical perspectives on dispositions**

The notion of dispositions has been interpreted from multiple theoretical perspectives. From a developmental perspective, dispositions are viewed as biologically-determined characteristics like temperament and personality traits (Duncan, Jones, & Carr, 2008; Katz, 1993; Katz & Raths, 1985) or as psychological constructs related to thinking (Tishman, Jay, & Perkins, 1993). Alternatively, from a sociocultural perspective, dispositions are viewed as constructs that are learned and fostered in the context of relationships and supportive learning environments over time (Carr, 2001; Katz, 1993; Meade, 2000). For example, the disposition to be creative is developed early in a setting where the use of the imagination is encouraged and then strengthened over time by others who support and promote creative thinking and problem solving.

Lilian Katz, one of the first scholars to promote dispositions as an important outcome in early childhood education, termed them habits of mind that comprised knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Katz, 1993). For example, the disposition to read was said to comprise three interrelated aspects: knowing how to read, being able to read, and wanting to read. In other words, having the skill to read was different to, but part of, having the disposition to use the skill.

In the context of early childhood education in New Zealand, Carr (2001) adapted Katz’s (1988, 1993) work on dispositions, but placed more emphasis on the learning environment as an influence in their development. Carr (2001) summarised a dispositional approach to learning as being ready, willing, and able to engage in learning and defined dispositions as “participation repertoires from which a learner recognises, selects, edits, responds to, resists, searches for and constructs learning opportunities” (p. 47). A consideration for the situated nature of dispositions appeared to signal a move away from dispositions “in the head”, such as Katz’s habits of mind, to dispositions “in the environment” (Carr et al., 2009, p. 15). A connection between dispositions and the context in which learning occurs is consistent with sociocultural theory.
On the basis of Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, learning dispositions are therefore said to be situated and mediated through social partners, social practices, and cultural tools (e.g., language and symbols; Carr, 2001; Jordan, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). Social interactions and cultural tools, such as language, are seen as fundamental to the development of learning dispositions (Carr, 2008; Jordan, 2009). Learning dispositions from a sociocultural perspective are dynamic in the sense they can be influenced through interactive exchanges with others, involving dialogue or verbal/non-verbal encouragement from attentive adults. However, dispositions that are shaped by ever-changing environments can also be challenging constructs to understand.

Writers have deemed dispositions challenging constructs because of the fact they can be defined in multiple ways, so are imprecise (Bone, 2001; Carr & Claxton, 2002; Crick, 2010; Sadler, 2002). In relation to early childhood education, Bone (2001) argued that multiple definitions of learning dispositions can be theoretically inconsistent, and that it is this inconsistency which makes them difficult to assess. Yet, it has also been suggested that difficulties in defining complex constructs should not act as obstacles to their consideration in learning and assessment (Carr, 2001; Coffield, 2002). What may be needed then is for early childhood teachers to acknowledge that dispositions are problematic and to ensure their understandings of dispositions concur with current theoretical perspectives, especially important for teachers in New Zealand who are encouraged to assess them from a sociocultural perspective, as per *Te Whāriki*.

Therefore, consistent with theoretical shifts, and as outlined in Chapter one, a sociocultural perspective of learning dispositions has been adopted for this study. Accordingly, learning dispositions are acknowledged as complex constructs and as stated on page 4, refer to motivation-related participation strategies that are shaped through social and cultural experiences and employed in particular learning situations in various contexts. With this in mind, an exploration of dispositions deemed important in the early years is needed in order to establish what teachers might need to consider in assessment.

**Learning dispositions deemed important in the early years**

The literature is replete with lists of dispositions deemed important for learning in the early years. Some lists include general dispositions, such as the disposition to go on learning (Katz, 1993) or the more specific, such as “being bossy” (Carr & Claxton,
In any list, dispositions too specific might result in a list too long, and dispositions too general might mean they are more difficult to observe or assess (Katz, 1993). Different writers have proposed lists that they believe are relevant to early learning. For example, Bertram and Pascal (2002) emphasised four educative dispositions for effective learners: independence, creativity, self-motivation, and resilience. Carr and Claxton (2002) proposed three key dispositions for lifelong learning: resilience, playfulness, and reciprocity. The existence of multiple lists means a wide range of dispositions relevant to young learners is possible.

In relation to early childhood education, Carr (2001) proposed five dispositions that linked to the strands of Te Whāriki (MoE, 1996a). Consistent with sociocultural theory, each disposition described a feature of children's participation and relationships in learning. These dispositions were coined and described as follows: courage and curiosity, which related to the strand of belonging was said to be evident when a learner showed an interest; trust and playfulness, which related to the strand of well-being was said to be evident when a learner was involved in learning; perseverance, which related to the strand of exploration was said to be evident when a learner persisted with difficulty or uncertainty; confidence, which related to the strand of communication was said to be evident when a learner expressed a point of view or feeling; and justice and fairness, which related to the strand of contribution was said to be evident when a learner took responsibility for self and others (Carr, 1995, 2001).

Furthermore, Te Whāriki considered other dispositions also consistent with sociocultural theory: for example, to collaborate and to reason with others (MoE, 1996a). This focus on dispositions in the curriculum was viewed as an innovative approach to understanding children’s learning (May, 2009). Not only that, it seemed to cement learning dispositions as an on-going focus in New Zealand early childhood education, with implications for assessment.

It is important for teachers to acknowledge that families might emphasise and interpret particular dispositions based on cultural values. For example, Bertram and Pascal (2002) highlighted independence, defined as “the ability to be self-sufficient, to self-organize, and self-manage” (p. 248), as a valued disposition for effective learning in the early years. Yet, Rogoff’s (2003) work on the cultural nature of human development suggested that in some cultures, the ability to be interdependent, or oriented to the
group, is valued over the desire for independence. In addition, Claxton (2002) suggested that dispositions, such as to “cope well” (p. 23), can be interpreted differently within and between cultures. In some cultures, it means compliance yet, in others, it means creativity.

Therefore, consistent with a sociocultural approach, teachers who aim to foster infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions in meaningful ways will first draw on knowledge of a range of valued dispositions. They will then use these as a lens to interpret their observations of children’s disposition-related experiences in the centre. In addition, they ought to draw on families’ descriptions of dispositions and disposition-related actions manifested in the home. Teachers should then use this information to negotiate with families the dispositions deemed important to foster in relation to their children. To engage the interest of families, it is important that teachers are able to explain to families the relevance of learning dispositions in relation to their child, a topic discussed next.

**The relevance of learning dispositions**

The importance of learning dispositions in early education has been well documented (e.g., see Bertram & Pascal, 2002; Carr, 2001, 2008; Katz, 1993). In particular, dispositions have been argued as being key to sustaining the development of young minds (Da Ros-Voseles & Fowler-Haughey, 2007); and to helping learners adapt easily to new situations or settings (Carr, 2001; Carr et al., 2009). Common to these views is the idea that learning dispositions have enduring effects on children’s on-going learning journeys.

Learning dispositions have also been emphasised as key attributes for effective learning based on a number of factors. One factor is they have potential to influence how a child approaches learning during their years of education and beyond (Bertram & Pascal, 2002). Thus, if positive dispositions are fostered early and supported over time, then it is likely that positive views about learning will be engendered and sustained. In addition, as learning dispositions are related to motivation (Carr, 2001), they can potentially prompt learners to utilise prior knowledge and/or skills in new or challenging situations, when required and as appropriate (Carr et al., 2009). Taken together, these factors highlight the importance of learning dispositions in children’s...
first years of life and, therefore, the need for teachers and families to understand how they can be fostered over time.

**Understanding progress in dispositional learning**

Progress in dispositional learning occurs when dispositions are strengthened in one setting and, in turn, transferred to and employed in another. Children’s capacity to call on particular strategies to engage in learning across a number of situations is referred to as breadth (Claxton & Carr, 2004). However, while breadth in dispositional learning enhances a child’s ability to “read” learning opportunities and possibilities in other situations, putting this ability to use is not guaranteed and depends on other qualities (Carr & Claxton, 2002).

The robustness and richness of learning dispositions are other qualities that support a child’s broad use of dispositions (Claxton & Carr, 2004). Robustness refers to a child’s ability to tolerate more challenge and/or uncertainty in a particular situation, for example, learning to persist with less and less support from teachers and families over time. Richness is about learning dispositions becoming more flexible and sophisticated in their manifestations over time (Claxton & Carr, 2004). For example, a toddler’s disposition to be helpful might initially manifest in the way he deliberately moves out of the way of a peer to enable that peer to complete a task without hindrance. After teacher support and encouragement, the child’s disposition to be helpful might then progress to the toddler’s ability to model to others how to complete the same task unaided.

Literature suggests that dispositions are cultivated early through engagement and participation in social and cultural experiences and are supported through dialogue and positive interactions over time (Bary et al., 2008; Carr, 2001; Jordan, 2009; Meade, 2000). Teachers, therefore, have a responsibility to support children’s dispositional progress in the centre, with these early beginnings in mind. In particular, Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva’s (2004) research on pedagogy in the early years, which partly involved qualitative analysis, asserted learning dispositions were supported most effectively in educational settings that promoted a balance of child and teacher-initiated learning experiences, and when teachers identified and encouraged this learning during play. This finding has implications for teachers in settings that promote free play, a long standing tradition of early childhood education (Hedges & Cullen, 2011). It is also
important because dispositions can be weakened when such supportive experiences are absent (Katz, 1993). Literature also suggests that teachers can support progress in dispositional learning by making links between home and centre, which will now be discussed.

**Continuity in dispositional learning across home and centre**

Early childhood studies focusing on children’s approaches to learning suggest that children come to settings with patterns of learning that have been shaped by their families (Carr, 2002a; Plowman, Stephen, & McPake, 2010). For example, Carr (2002a) investigated the learning dispositions of a group of 4-year-old children in a New Zealand kindergarten context and made explicit references to the home as a key influence on how children approached, selected, interpreted, and edited their centre-based experiences. This finding places a responsibility on teachers to know more about the home and family as an influence on children’s dispositional learning, and is consistent with sociocultural theory. It also reflects Claxton and Carr’s (2004) idea that dispositions are transferrable across settings and aligns with Carr’s (2001) notion of dispositions as participation repertoires. However, Carr’s (2002a) study did not explore the nature of children’s home experiences neither explored how teachers assessed and made use of this kind of information.

The importance of teachers knowing how children’s home experiences influence dispositional learning was emphasised in a British research project exploring the technology learning of 3- and 4-year-old children (Plowman et al., 2010). The sociocultural underpinnings of the research helped to illuminate parents as influential to their children’s learning dispositions in the home, despite parents not realising this was so. Qualitative interviews with teachers revealed that their knowledge of children’s experiences in the family home were limited, which, in turn, affected their ability to draw on prior learning to support children’s learning in the centre. The findings emphasise the importance of teacher-family partnerships, supported by learning-focused dialogue, as meaningful ways to support children’s dispositional learning in the centre. The importance of teachers engaging in learning-focused dialogue with families is consistent with earlier studies (Bridge, 2001; Bull et al., 2008).

Indeed, literature has endorsed the integral role families play in influencing children’s learning dispositions. Families have been viewed as mediators, supporters, reviewers,
and interpreters of dispositional learning, especially when they help children to make sense of new situations and to revisit, recognise, and re-interpret their experiences (Carr, 2002a; Carr et al., 2009). Families have also been viewed as promoters of particular dispositions, such as caring and decency, in their children (Swick, 2001), or as message-givers, sending out messages about how to approach learning to their children over time (Dweck, 2006). These endorsements concur with Carr et al. (2009) who argued that dispositions can often be traced back through children’s families.

In particular, the significance of families as an influence on infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions is also evident in the literature. For example, it has been suggested that when families encourage their infants’ and toddlers’ involvement in family activities, their disposition to be curious is supported (Raban, 2001). Similarly, studies asserted that reciprocal interactions between infants and mothers are key influences on infants’ motivation and disposition to engage in a shared activity (Makin, 2006; Popper & Cohn, 1990). What is more, Carr et al. (2009), drawing on Moore and Dunham’s (1995) idea of joint attention episodes, argued that early interactive exchanges between infants and adults marked the beginning of the disposition of reciprocity with potential influences on later reciprocal relationships.

The studies reviewed thus far validate families as integral to the development of their children’s learning dispositions. They also highlight that children’s early relationships with families play a pivotal role in developing positive learning dispositions. Without this knowledge, teachers’ interpretations of children’s dispositions are likely to be limited, which, in turn, will affect how progress in dispositional learning will be supported. In addition to families, teachers’ values and beliefs can also influence dispositional learning, and will be discussed next.

### Teachers’ values and beliefs as influences in dispositional learning

In general, beliefs and understandings about learning have been viewed as messy constructs, often difficult to articulate and resistant to change (Pajares, 1992). However, they are an important focus in education as they appear to have a significant influence on teachers’ actions, decision-making, and views of learners (Degotardi & Davis, 2008; Stephen, 2010). The following studies explore the nature of teachers’ beliefs, values and/or understandings generally, all of which have implications for children’s learning dispositions.
A British study drew on sociocultural theory to explore influences on teachers’ perspectives of pedagogy with children aged 3 to 6 years (Stephen, 2010). To facilitate the investigation, teacher interviews and research field notes were analysed. It was found that a teacher’s tacit beliefs could be powerfully yet implicitly influenced by the views of his/her teaching colleagues, even to the extent of superseding ideas gained through teacher-education. This finding suggests that teachers may enter a centre with their own values and beliefs about learning, but then potentially take on the values of the teaching team around them, especially in centres with a clearly defined centre-endorsed statement of values and beliefs.

Stephen (2010) also argued that teachers’ beliefs based on a Piagetian perspective of free play and the nature of the teacher’s role in it were problematic. Stephen critiqued teachers being guided by notions such as free choice, a prepared environment, and the child as an active explorer, as research has since challenged and modified Piagetian theory (see Hedges & Cullen, 2011). It was argued teachers’ emphasis on downplaying their interactions with children, reflects a “laissez-faire approach” (p. 20) to supporting progress and change in a child’s learning. Stephen concluded by arguing for teachers to think critically about the implementation of particular theoretical perspectives of learning and how these shape or limit aspects of their practice. This necessity applies to the way in which teachers support children’s dispositional learning. It is also relevant to teachers who are guided by particular theoretical or philosophical approaches, such as the RIE philosophy which guided the teachers in this study.

In New Zealand, recent attempts to enhance teachers’ views about infants’ and toddlers’ learning have occurred (e.g., Dalli et al., 2011; Johansson & White, 2011). Furthermore, a few studies have focused on teachers’ understandings of infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions (e.g., Bary et al., 2008; Bashford & Bartlett, 2011). Bary et al. (2008) used case study methodology, field notes, and Rogoff’s (1998) sociocultural ideas to investigate influences on infants’ disposition to enquire. The study found that relationships between teachers were influential to infants’ disposition to enquire. In addition, teachers indicated that their participation in the research had enhanced their understandings about infants’ and toddlers’ learning and the nature of the disposition to enquire. While families were mentioned, the main focus of the study was on teachers working with each other in a supportive learning environment, rather than with families, to support infants’ disposition to enquire.
However, apart from Bary et al. (2008), few other studies in New Zealand or internationally could be found that explored teachers’ understandings of or views about infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions. Furthermore, literature highlighted the learning environment as yet another consideration in relation to learning dispositions.

**Learning environments as influential to dispositional learning**

Alongside teachers’ values and beliefs, the learning environments children find themselves in have been seen as influential on children’s dispositional learning (Claxton, 2007; Claxton & Carr, 2004). Claxton and Carr (2004) argued that particular characteristics of a learning environment can either strengthen or weaken dispositional learning and emphasised the need to pay attention to how this happens. To clarify, Claxton and Carr explained four types of environment: *prohibiting, affording, inviting,* and *potentiating*. In a prohibiting environment, routines are rigid and collaboration is restricted, inhibiting a learner’s ability to express positive responses to learning. An affording environment provides a range of opportunities for learning dispositions to take place but these may prove insufficient for all learners. An inviting environment encourages and values learners' inquiries and encourages collaboration, yet does not actively develop these dispositions further. In contrast, a potentiating environment, the most powerful disposition-enhancing environment of the four, not only encourages learners to express particular responses to learning, but reinforces, fosters, and strengthens them. Furthermore, teachers and families have active roles to play in a potentiating environment.

**Summary**

This section has provided a definition of learning dispositions for this study (p. 15). In addition, the literature reviewed in this section has established that learning dispositions are problematic, in regard to how they are defined, assessed, and supported by teachers in centres. The literature also established that effective support of dispositional learning requires teachers to have knowledge of a broad range of dispositions, qualities of progress, the nature and potential consequences of multiple influences, families as a main influence, and, most importantly, interactive ways to foster them.

To support the effective fostering of infants and toddlers’ dispositional learning, teachers also need to know how to assess dispositional learning. This topic is discussed next.
Section three: Assessment of dispositional learning

In this section, literature related to assessment of dispositional learning is reviewed. First, a dispositional approach to assessment is explored. Then, the challenging nature of the learning story framework is presented. Finally, the notion of learning stories in relation to infants and toddlers is discussed. This section concludes with a summary of key themes, which have relevance to this study.

A dispositional approach to assessment

So far, the literature reviewed has emphasised that, from a sociocultural perspective, learning dispositions are complex outcomes to assess. This complexity is reflected by the fact they are more than just skills and knowledge (Katz, 1993), they can be defined in multiple ways, and they are interpreted in relation to context (Carr, 2001). While Sadler (2002) believed dispositions had an enabling influence on learning, he expressed concern in assessing something that was complex, or “context-dependent, situational, uncertain and volatile” (p. 49). Therefore, assessment methods designed to assess complex outcomes are needed.

A range of methods to assess learning dispositions exist. However, not all of these are relevant to infants and toddlers, such as models requiring learners to explain their own learning experiences (e.g., Deakin Crick, Broadfoot, & Claxton, 2004). Models that recognise the pre-verbal nature of infants and toddlers, that are based on both observation and interpretation, and have the potential to encourage families to share their perspectives about their child’s learning, seem to be most relevant for infants and toddlers. Learning stories (Carr, 2001) have been argued as having such capacity (Carr & Cowie, 2009). This capacity is reflected in the support learning stories have received internationally (Daniels, 2011; Karlsdóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2010) and nationally (Carr, 2005; Carr & Cowie, 2009; Cooper, 2009; Hatherly & Sands, 2002), including in the school sector (MoE, 2009b).

Carr’s (2001) learning stories are a narrative form of assessment, which are underpinned by sociocultural theory and align with Te Whāriki’s principles and strands. Teachers collaborate with families to write learning stories by documenting observations about children’s experiences and interpretations about any significant learning gleaned from those observations. Learning stories were initially intended to assess Carr’s (2001) five learning dispositions and observable actions, as outlined
earlier, relating to children’s participation and relationships. However, dispositions other than Carr’s five are possible, which poses a challenge for teachers in terms of the range of dispositions they are expected to know about.

In particular, learning stories were seen to support three sociocultural notions for assessment: competence, continuity, and community (Carr, 2002b; Cowie & Carr, 2009). Learning stories support competence when they are used to enhance learners’ views of themselves as competent, aligning with Te Whāriki’s credit-based view of children as “competent and confident learners and communicators” (MoE, 1996a, p. 9). Learning stories promote continuity when teachers and other adults use them to record and foster learning dispositions within and across everyday settings. Also, learning stories support a sense of community by encouraging the sharing of stories with others. For example, children and families can write, retell, and revisit learning stories together, children can read their stories with each other and teachers and families can revisit stories with children. Using learning stories in these ways can strengthen families’ connections with the curriculum (Carr, 2005). Yet, despite their potential, the learning stories framework has been critiqued for the challenges it might present to teachers. These challenges are discussed next.

The challenging nature of the learning story framework
Learning stories, while not prescribed, have become the preferred method of assessment in early childhood settings throughout New Zealand (ERO, 2007). However, some writers have argued that learning stories can be challenging for teachers because their use demands specialised knowledge in various areas. These areas of knowledge include the framework itself, sociocultural theory, reflective practice, and interpretation (Farquhar & Fleer, 2007), a challenge for infant and toddler education given that only 50% of teachers require a qualification. In addition, writers have argued that learning stories can encourage teachers to focus more on the attitudinal element of learning dispositions and less on the involved skills and knowledge (Blaiklock, 2008, 2010; McLachlan, Fleer & Edwards, 2010).

Blaiklock (2008) argued that learning stories were problematic for several reasons. These reasons included difficulty with stories achieving validity, the danger of formulating subjective interpretations from potentially brief observations, minimal guidance regarding how to use learning stories, issues with defining learning
dispositions, and difficulties in using learning stories to illustrate children's progress in learning over time. Blaiklock's concerns may have some validity given that teachers in early childhood education and care commonly have little non-contact time to document assessment (Searle, 2008) and not all have had the opportunity to participate in associated professional learning opportunities about assessment.

**Learning stories in relation to infants and toddlers**

Traditional views of assessment in early childhood education reveal a long-held reliance on developmental theory and associated indicators (Carr, 2001). However, in New Zealand, as noted, assessment practices have become built on sociocultural theory. Assessment with young children emphasises reciprocal relationships with people, places and things and the integral involvement of families and whānau (MoE, 2004). The notions of assessing infants’ and toddlers’ learning and assessment as a relational process were first established by *Te Whāriki* and then endorsed by the *Kei tua o te pae* assessment exemplars (MoE, 2004, 2007, 2009a).

*Kei tua o te pae*’s introduction to the early childhood sector was aimed at supporting teachers’ implementation of *Te Whāriki*’s principles in assessment. Professional development initiatives, funded by the MoE, were established in 2005 to support its implementation across the nation (Carr, 2009). In particular, assessment for infants and toddlers was covered in the 24-page Book 8 (MoE, 2004) out of 20 in the series. A survey conducted by Mitchell (2008) found that by 2007, only 34% of teachers had made use of Book 8 to inform their assessment practices with infants and toddlers.

In particular, all of the exemplars in the book were narratives, and all mentioned Carr’s (2001) dispositional domains. In some stories, dispositions other than Carr’s were mentioned, such as the disposition to be independent. As mentioned earlier, this consideration for other dispositions seemed to suggest teachers were able to think more broadly than Carr’s five related to *Te Whāriki*.

While this flexibility was promising in relation to sociocultural assessment, references to families were hardly evident in these exemplars, which seemed to counter *Kei tua o te Pae*’s emphasis on the importance of family and whānau in assessment (MoE, 2004). In one of the exemplars that did refer to family, a teacher had documented a family member's contribution about her child’s disposition to be helpful in the home, which
was then supported by teachers in the centre (MoE, 2004, p. 19), revealing an example of how teachers can promote families’ involvement in assessment.

The need to have a flexible narrative approach to assessment was endorsed in a New Zealand study, which involved two teachers of infants and toddlers modifying Carr’s (2001) descriptions of dispositions (Bashford & Bartlett, 2011). Bashford and Bartlett argued that the descriptive language used to describe the learning dispositions in Carr’s (2001) learning stories framework did not meaningfully reflect the “actions, behaviours and special characteristics” (p. 26) of the infants and toddlers in their setting. Therefore, the teachers modified the existing descriptions to better reflect their learners. For example, Carr’s (2001) disposition of perseverance and its domain “to persist with difficulty” was changed to the disposition of exploration and its domain “to make sense of… self, people, places and things” (p. 27). The teachers felt they had enhanced their understandings of learning dispositions and expectations of what they might see by engaging in an exercise involving thinking more deeply about the dispositional learning of infants and toddlers in the setting. However, while it was evident teachers drew on multiple sources to inform these changes, it was unclear if and how they had involved families in the process, important considering families have valuable insights about how their infants and/or toddlers approach learning in the home.

Other researchers in New Zealand evaluated the quality of teachers’ practices with infants and toddlers (Podmore & May, 2003). Teachers in the study used narratives to document their observations of infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions. While these narratives informed teachers’ practices, they were challenged by the need to have a theoretical understanding and knowledge of concepts such as learning dispositions, revealing knowledge of learning dispositions as another challenge for teachers.

While Bashford and Bartlett (2011) and Podmore and May (2003) provided evidence of the use of learning stories with infants and toddlers, only Bashford and Bartlett discussed teachers’ views about their method of assessing dispositional learning. However, no other studies relevant to this issue were able to be located.

Summary

The literature reviewed in this section established that effective assessment of infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions with families requires flexibility and high levels of knowledge. This knowledge was said to include sociocultural theory, reflective
practice, interpretation, how to make visible progress in dispositional learning, and the learning stories framework. While learning stories have potential to support children’s dispositional learning as well as enhance the involvement of families in their child’s learning and assessment, they appear to be challenging to use.

Overall themes and gaps in the literature

The literature reviewed in this chapter highlighted that assessment, learning dispositions, and dispositional approaches to assessment are challenging and complex notions. Each notion requires high levels of professional knowledge, a need to be flexible, and critically reflective, with particular consideration for potential influences on these notions. The literature also emphasised the importance for teachers to acknowledge the important role families play in the cultivation of their children’s dispositional learning. Teachers, therefore, have a responsibility to identify children’s dispositional learning manifested in the setting, to consider that this learning is likely to have stemmed from home, and to support it in the setting in interactive ways, in partnership with families. Teachers are also encouraged to be flexible and adaptable to engaging families in learning-focused dialogue and in the ways they assess the learning dispositions of infants and toddlers.

After the review of literature, some gaps in the current research were evident:

First, of significance to this study, a gap in the literature was evident with regards to studies investigating teachers’ views about assessment related specifically to infants and toddlers, and views about teachers’ use of learning stories to support dispositional learning over time. Second, a gap was evident in literature regarding teachers’ understandings of, or views about, infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions. Then third, literature endorsed the importance of partnerships with families in assessment, as per Te Whāriki, yet there was an apparent lack of literature regarding effective partnerships as they relate to assessing children’s learning dispositions.

The research questions

This study set out to investigate the overarching question:

*How do teachers understand families’ involvement in assessment of infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions?*
To facilitate investigation of this question, the review of related literature helped to inform the development of the following sub-questions. The first sub-question was informed by the review of literature relating to learning dispositions, the idea that it can be a challenging construct for teachers to understand, and the apparent gap in the literature regarding teachers’ understandings of infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions.

- What do teachers understand regarding how learning dispositions are cultivated?

The second sub-question was informed by the review of literature on assessment of learning dispositions, a lack of studies investigating teachers’ views about assessment relating to infants and toddlers, and the idea that teachers in New Zealand appear to utilise a challenging method to assess learning dispositions. It was also informed by the scant research available exploring teachers’ views about how they use learning stories to support dispositional learning over time.

- In what ways do teachers understand assessment of learning dispositions?

Finally, the third question was informed by literature that highlighted the importance of partnerships with families in assessment, ideas based on the problematic nature of establishing such partnerships, as well as the apparent lack of literature regarding these partnerships in relation to assessing the learning dispositions of infants and toddlers.

- How do teachers view the involvement of families in assessment of learning dispositions?

**The next chapter**

In the following chapter, the research process and methods utilised to gain insight into teachers’ understandings about how learning dispositions are cultivated and assessed, and the involvement of families in these processes, are described and justified.
Chapter three  
METHODOLOGY

**Introduction**

Good educational research involves rigorous inquiry to make sense of particular phenomena (McLachlan, 2010). More specifically, effective qualitative research offers a useful insight into phenomena in the social world (Neuman, 2003). The previous chapter introduced a review of the literature regarding assessment in early childhood education, learning dispositions, and assessment of learning dispositions, with an emphasis on infants and toddlers and families. This chapter describes and justifies the research paradigm, methodology and methods used to explore the phenomenon that emerged from the review. This phenomenon is teachers’ understandings of families’ involvement in assessing the learning dispositions of infants and toddlers.

This chapter begins with an overview of the research paradigm. A description of the qualitative, case study methodology is presented. Next, details of the research context, including the site and participants, are provided. Following this, ethical considerations of informed consent, confidentiality, minimisation of risks, and benefits for participants are outlined. Data gathering techniques utilised in this study, including interviews, centre documentation and field notes, are described. Procedures used to guide data analysis are outlined. Finally, issues of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability, are discussed.

**Research paradigm**

A research paradigm represents a researcher’s set of beliefs, assumptions, ideas and feelings about the world, which, while not always explicit, shape how research will be conducted (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Four main paradigms are discussed in the literature: positivist, interpretive, critical and post-structural (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 2009). While these paradigms can overlap in particular research, they are distinguished by their specific purposes, types of research and views of reality.

An interpretive paradigm was deemed appropriate for my study. Such a paradigm involves researchers describing, interpreting, and analysing people’s words and the reasons and motives behind their decisions, to make sense of how knowledge and meaning about
the world are created and come to be (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Neuman, 2003). In particular, it rests on three key assumptions: firstly, multiple and valid views of a phenomenon exist (ontology); secondly, a researcher’s beliefs and assumptions cannot be separated out from what is being investigated (epistemology); and thirdly, methods used to seek out interpretations will be subjective and naturalistic (methodology; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

My selection of an interpretive paradigm accounted for the teachers’ multiple and varied understandings with regard to the cultivation and assessment of learning dispositions and family involvement in assessment of learning dispositions. It assumed that my beliefs and assumptions would have some effect on my interpretations of teachers’ perspectives. Furthermore, an interpretivist paradigm aligned with the sociocultural basis of this study, which looks at notions of context-bound understandings, relationships and a sense of community.

**Qualitative methodology**

A qualitative methodology was selected for my study. This decision was supported by literature related to describing and making sense of teaching and learning experiences (Plowman et al., 2010; Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). Consistent with an interpretivist paradigm, a qualitative methodology utilises interpretive strategies and techniques to explore the meaning, rather than the frequency, of social phenomena (Merriam, 2009). In seeking out a rich description, qualitative methodology acknowledges that people view phenomena according to their own filters and that these perspectives are shaped by context. Therefore, a qualitative methodology led me to expect that teachers’ perspectives, as well as my interpretations, would be somewhat coloured by personal experience and context.

Overall, a qualitative methodology was considered appropriate to this study as it supported my intent to explore and describe in-depth insights, a key hallmark of qualitative methodology, into the nature of teachers’ understandings regarding aspects of their practice.

**Case Studies**

Case studies in qualitative research are useful when a detailed and rich, rather than broad, understanding of a particular phenomenon is needed. Yin (2003) defines a case study as
“an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (p. 13). This view posits case study as a process that takes into account the context of a phenomenon, as was evident in previous studies (Bary et al., 2008; Bridge, 2001). The phenomenon being analysed in this study was teachers’ understandings of the cultivation and assessment of learning dispositions, and families’ involvement in these notions, as they occurred in the everyday context of an early childhood setting.

Such emphasis on context is a key tenet of case study methodology (Punch, 2009; Yin, 2003) and contributes to this case study’s rich description. Viewing a case holistically reflects Lincoln and Guba’s (2000, in Stake, 2005) emphasis on the situational nature of social inquiry. In my study, teachers’ understandings had to be interpreted in relation to the context in which they occurred and the contextual factors that might have influenced them. These factors included policy statements related to assessment and family involvement, the centre’s philosophy statement and the way in which children were organised.

Qualitative research also affirms the researcher as the main agent for collecting and analysing research data (Merriam, 2009). In relation to researcher bias (Merriam, 2009), I worked from the understanding that any meaning constructed from my interpretations of teachers’ perspectives represented only one of many possibilities. Hence, I acknowledged that the data I gathered, through visiting, talking with, and interviewing teachers in their early childhood centre, represented the personal views of the teachers concerned. These up-close interactions generated rich information about their understandings in relation to their everyday setting (Stake, 2005). In turn, this enhanced the likelihood that my interpretations would be valid.

Another distinguishing feature of a case study concerns the limitations placed around a phenomenon to create a bounded system (Merriam, 2009). In this study, these limits included focusing on the understandings of five teachers in one setting, conducting in-depth probing of all of those participants’ understandings, through interviews, at a particular point in time. The limited number of participants, the single research site, and the pre-arranged time and place of interviews acted as limiting factors that qualified this case, or the phenomenon of teachers’ understandings, as a bounded system.

A qualitative case study claims special features, which include being particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic (Merriam, 2009). Particularistic refers to a specific focus on a
particular phenomenon, in this case, teachers’ understandings of families’ involvement in assessment of infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions. Descriptive refers to the rich, thick description of that phenomenon. Finally, heuristic refers to the ability of a case study to foster new meanings about the phenomenon being studied. A case study’s specificity, descriptive nature and ability to foster new understandings contribute to its detail and depth.

With these ideas in mind, case study methodology was considered appropriate to my study. My study was particularistic in the sense it had a specific focus on teachers’ perceptions about their and families’ roles in assessment of learning dispositions, as well as the ways in which teachers drew on families’ perspectives to support children’s dispositions. It was descriptive by way of the rich, thick descriptions provided of the phenomenon and its context. Furthermore, its heuristic nature was reflected in its potential to highlight to the early childhood community the complexity of assessing learning dispositions with families, given that the participant teachers were fully qualified and therefore likely to be committed to quality education in a real-life setting. Case study methodology also supported my interest in conducting a detailed probing of teachers’ understandings anchored in an everyday early childhood setting. Details of this setting are presented next.

**The research context**

This section describes and justifies my decisions regarding the research context. Sampling of the site is described and gaining access to the site is explained. Finally, the research site and participants are discussed.

**Sampling of site**

The research site was selected using non-probability sampling (Neuman, 2003). Non-probability sampling, a common method in qualitative case studies, involves a non-random selection of a sample to represent a wider population. This specialised population, or purposive sample (Stake, 2005), is explored intensively and often possesses atypical characteristics to other settings. Thus, it proffers more opportunities to learn from than studying a larger population (Stake, 2005).

As part of the research site, the main criterion for teacher participants in this study was that they be qualified early childhood teachers, or studying towards a qualification, employed
on a permanent (or fixed term/long-term) basis in an early childhood centre, and teaching infants and/or toddlers. This criterion enhanced the likelihood that participant teachers would be familiar with *Te Whāriki*’s emphasis on families’ involvement in assessment (MoE, 1996a). It also enhanced the likelihood that teacher participants would have documented assessment of infants’ and/or toddlers’ learning during their time in the setting. In this study, selection of the research site was determined by further purposive criteria, which included my prior knowledge of the teachers in the site, the size of the teaching team, adult to child interactions and the centre’s licensing status.

The first criterion concerned my prior knowledge of the teachers in the potential site. Through my role as University Supervisor for student-teachers on practicum, I had visited various centres for infants and toddlers in Auckland, including the participating site in this study which had a reputation for quality practices.

The second criterion concerned the size of the team teaching children under three. McLachlan (2010), using Onwuegbuzie and Collins’ (2007) suggestions for sample sizes, highlighted a minimum of three to five participants for case study research. Selecting a site that contained more than three teachers teaching children under three enhanced the likelihood the suggested minimum would be achieved. This centre met this criterion by having at least seven teachers in such a position.

The third criterion related to adult to child interactions. The centre promoted the importance of frequent one-to-one interactions in their philosophy statement (see Appendix A). In relation to this emphasis on one-to-one interactions and qualified teachers, it was therefore likely that teachers in the setting would value or be aware of quality education for infants and toddlers and hence knowledgeable about, and interested in, the infant and toddler learners in their setting.

The fourth criterion related to the centre’s licensing status. As pointed out in Chapter one, all licensed early childhood services are currently obligated to implement the national curriculum framework, or aspects of it, which in mainstream settings is *Te Whāriki*. This site was licensed under the *Education (Early Childhood Centres) Regulations* (MoE, 1998) and promoted *Te Whāriki* in centre documentation. Therefore, this centre could be expected to be fulfilling assessment practices consistent with such legal requirements.
Gaining access to the site

After obtaining approval from the University of Auckland Human Participants’ Ethics Committee (14 December 2010) and prior to approaching potential participants, in January 2011, I made contact with the owner of the research site to organise a meeting. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss the research and to provide her with an information sheet about the project (Appendix B) and a consent form for access to the centre (Appendix C), as well as copies of information sheets and consent forms for teachers (Appendices D and E) and parents/guardians (Appendices F and G).

Planning research in early childhood settings involves ensuring all research activity makes good use of teachers’ time (Cullen, Hedges & Bone, 2009). Therefore, once access to the site was granted, I met with teachers at their routine evening staff meeting to ensure minimal disruption to their teaching. An introduction to the project was given, which stimulated questions from teachers about the duration of the project and the nature of their involvement.

The research site

The early childhood education and care centre setting selected for this study was a well-established privately-owned centre, located in an inner-city suburb of Auckland. The centre was licensed to provide full day education and care for 35 children, including a maximum of 12 children under two. In relation to the structure of the centre, children under two, defined by the centre as children aged 3 months to 2 years, were located in the upstairs part of the centre, with a wooden deck overlooking the area where the children over two, defined by the centre as children aged 2 to 5 years, were based. Such a physical layout allowed teachers in both groups to see and communicate with each other regularly. While the groups were in separate areas of the centre, teachers and children from both groups intermingled during the day, particularly in the outdoor play environment, which was located downstairs in the over two area. Teachers from both groups were approached to align with this study’s focus on children under three.

Teachers teaching infants and toddlers, who are defined in Te Whāriki as children being birth to 3 years (MoE, 1996a), were the focus of this study. Children were not directly involved in this study. The centre owner’s involvement was limited to providing access to the centre and teachers. The parents'/caregivers’ involvement was limited to authorising use of their child’s portfolio documentation as data.
Although it was not part of the criteria for site selection, Gerber’s (1979) RIE philosophy of respect was important to the participating teachers and, therefore, became significant in my study. The RIE philosophy was established in 1978 in the United States, and was aimed at enhancing parents’ and caregivers’ understandings about caring for infants as capable, competent and autonomous learners, in their family homes (Gerber & Johnson, 1998). However, its emphasis on high quality care meant it eventually found its way into early childhood or group care programs with adults other than parents (Elam, 2005).

Gerber’s ideas about respectful care were derived from her associations with Emmi Pikler, a Hungarian paediatrician who ran an institutional residency in Hungary for children who had been separated from their families (Petrie, 2005).

Also significant to this study, to support the implementation of RIE, the participant teachers adopted a primary caregiving system, an approach which requires small groups of three to four children to be cared for by a primary caregiver or, as coined by Gerber (1979), “a mother figure” (p. 83). This primary caregiver, often supported by a secondary person, is responsible for the children’s care routines and documentation of each child’s growth and development (Elam, 2005). The idea of a secure relationship with at least one adult is consistent with *Te Whāriki*. Based on Kaplan’s (1978) and Schaffer and Emerson’s (1964) work on attachment in infancy (cited in MoE, 1993), *Te Whāriki* defines primary caregiving as “a staffing arrangement, particularly suitable for infants and toddlers, whereby one staff member has primary responsibility for a small group of children… it facilitates the attachment of very young children to one adult” (MoE, 1996a, p. 99). Hence, RIE is consistent with *Te Whāriki* in relation to recommended small group practice for infants and toddlers in early childhood education settings.

Furthermore, individual children’s portfolios were maintained by teachers in the participating centre. A portfolio is a range of documented evidence of children’s participatory and relational experiences during their time in the centre (Carr, 2001). In this centre, teachers used portfolios to house documentation related to notions such as children’s learning and development, transitions into the centre, and centre events that involved families, such as the centre Christmas party. My close reading of a range of infants’ and toddlers’ portfolios revealed learning stories as a main method of documentation. These portfolios were kept on a shelf at adults’ eye level, near the entrance of the centre, giving teachers and families access to them on entering or leaving the centre.
**Participant profile**

Five out of the seven teachers who met the participant profile agreed to become research participants of this study. As noted in Chapter one, current regulations require only 50% of teachers with children under two to be qualified (MoE, 2008). All of the teachers in this sample were teaching infants and/or toddlers and were qualified, meeting current legislation and reflecting the centre’s emphasis on quality provision and qualified staff (see Appendix A). Mindful of the ethical principle of confidentiality, pseudonyms have been assigned: Milan, Sarah, Nelly, Hannah and Rosa. As expected, the teachers revealed a variety of teaching experience between them, amounting to many years of teaching in early childhood and types of early childhood settings. Significantly, common to these teachers was their commitment to the RIE philosophy that underpinned centre practices. This commitment was evident in their regular references to RIE during their individual interviews and an endorsement of RIE in the centre’s philosophy statement. Milan, Sarah and Hannah were teachers of children under two (aged 3 months to 2), and Nelly and Rosa were teachers of children over two (aged 2 to 5).

In relation to the distribution of information about the study to families, teachers’ emphasis on their personal relationships with families, made explicit in the centre philosophy statement, influenced their decision to distribute the parents/guardians information sheets and consent sheets to families themselves. One teacher explained that this decision related to their primary caregiving relationships, as they were largely responsible for communicating with the families of children in their primary caregiving group.

**Ethical considerations**

In any research, ethical considerations must guide any decisions made for the duration of the research project (Cullen et al., 2009). This case study, which involved probing of teachers’ personal views and perspectives, was guided by particular ethical principles. In this section, principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and minimisation of risks, and benefits for participants are discussed.

**Informed consent**

A fundamental ethical principle in social research concerns participants’ awareness that their participation is voluntary (Neuman, 2003). The owner, centre manager, teachers and parents/guardians were fully informed of the nature of their participation. Participant
information sheets contained statements about voluntary participation and the right to refuse to participate. Informed consent was also verbally explained during the access meeting with the owner and manager, and during the initial meeting with the teachers.

All participants were informed verbally and in writing regarding the right to withdraw. Initially, six teachers consented to take part in the study. However, before the initial interviews took place, one teacher withdrew from the study for personal reasons, leaving five participants agreeing to continue. The ethical principle of voluntary participation was foregrounded at all times. Parents and caregivers were also informed of their right to withdraw the use of the data gathered from their child’s portfolio up to the end of data collection.

**Confidentiality**

The right to confidentiality for the owner, manager, teachers, families and their children, was respected at all times, although it could not be guaranteed. This notion was explained verbally and included in information sheets. Written assurance was given to teachers that their identities would not be disclosed in any of the data gathered, reported and published from this research. Pseudonyms are used in the reporting of results in Chapter four, and in the discussion of data in Chapter five, to protect the identities of teachers, children and their families. Storage of data was according to University of Auckland requirements. Written assurance was provided to all participants that data would be destroyed after six years.

**Minimisation of risk, and benefits for participants**

Any research potentially involves a need to consider the minimisation of harm for participants (Cullen et al., 2009). Asking teachers to articulate personal opinions and understandings meant there was a slight possibility they would feel uncomfortable with their level of knowledge about the research topic. In the unlikely event of this occurring, I planned to benefit teachers by referring them to relevant professional learning resources or the Faculty of Education's professional learning team to enhance their understandings with support. Another consideration in research is to ensure support will be available for teachers to act on the findings (Cullen et al., 2009). Hence, in the planning stages, I offered to support teachers to act on the outcomes of this study after its completion, by discussing the findings of my study and possible benefits for their teaching practice.
Data gathering

This section describes the data collection methods utilised in this study. Case study does not promote one method over another but the methods chosen should align with the theoretical premises of the project and characteristics of case study in general, such as insight, discovery and interpretation (Merriam, 2009). Furthermore, a selection of multiple sources of evidence is possible but should be determined by the nature of the research questions (Yin, 2003). Manageability of data is supported by focusing only on what is appropriate to the nature and focus of the research (Ezzy, 2002; Stake, 1995). This study utilised three main methods of data collection to align with the interpretive and qualitative nature of the investigation. These methods included semi-structured interviews, centre documentation, and researcher field notes.

Semi-structured interviews

Interviews are powerful tools for research as they provide access to how people perceive, make sense of and define their realities (Punch, 2009). They also enable researchers to gain this personal insight through guided conversation, all of which provides rich information for better understanding of a phenomenon. However, with such a method, it is important to acknowledge that individuals are not always able to provide a clear window into their perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions are recommended to allow for flexibility in participants’ personal accounts (Punch, 2009). Therefore, this study utilised semi-structured interviews for their flexible approach, to probe teachers’ understandings about learning dispositions and assessment with family, perceptions of which can be complex and hard to articulate (Appendix H). As part of these interviews teachers were asked to bring with them one child’s portfolio, something concrete to discuss in relation to the interview focus.

The interviews were held at a time and place convenient to the centre manager and individual teachers. Consistent with the centre’s RIE philosophy, unfamiliar adults were not employed to be with infants and toddlers. Therefore interview times were determined once the manager was able to secure their permanent reliever for continuity with children. I respected the manager’s decision to determine in what order the teachers would be interviewed and the time of day each interview would occur. Each interview was audio-taped by me after confirming their permission to be taped, and transcribed in full by a professional transcriber, who had signed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix I).
Centre documentation

Data was also collected from relevant centre documentation. This included policy and meeting documentation and children’s portfolio material. In order to determine potential influences on teachers’ understandings, the centre policies were read for relevance to assessment, the involvement of family, and dispositional learning. The centre’s emphasis on RIE was evident in a RIE centre policy (Appendix J), which endorsed the centre’s RIE philosophy statement, and made reference to aspects of autonomous learning and relationships with families, though not assessment. I was unable to locate a policy specific to assessment and to the involvement of families. Copies were taken of both the centre’s RIE policy and philosophy statement, as their contents potentially indicated a significant influence on teachers’ understandings. Copies were also taken of assessment-related meeting minutes, starting from three months prior to the point of data collection, to determine how teachers’ understandings might have been enacted in practice.

Additional centre documentation was sought from children’s portfolios. Once parents and caregivers consented to accessing their children’s portfolios, copies were taken only of documentation that incorporated references to learning dispositions and/or families (in accordance with this study’s definition of families, p. 4). This narrow but relevant focus aligned with the aims of the research, which referred to teachers’ understandings in relation to learning dispositions, assessment and family involvement. It also aided with data manageability. Alongside accessing children’s portfolios, I also asked teachers to bring with them one portfolio, of a child familiar to them, and to describe the documentation inside it, most of which were learning stories, and to describe the learning dispositions that were represented by photos in some of these. Teachers’ comments about this documentation were captured in the interview data.

Field notes

I was present at the centre on 11 occasions for a total of approximately 11.5 hours. Field notes were recorded of my informal observations of teachers’ actions in relation to their individual interviews and brief observations of practice during my centre visits. My use of field notes was consistent with earlier studies that explored influences on teaching and learning and also informed by sociocultural theory (Bary et al., 2008; Stephen, 2010). My impressions of the teachers’ practice, the learning environment, adult and child interactions, as well any observable family involvement in the centre were recorded.
Writing field notes after individual interviews and centre visits and during data collection, helped to inform and modify my interpretations of teachers’ perspectives as the research progressed. Documenting my thoughts, observations, queries and early interpretations represented initial and brief analyses of aspects of the process, contributing to the themes which were evident in the data.

**Analysis of data**

Analysis of data is a process of collecting, reducing, organising and interpreting data to highlight patterns that relate to research questions (Davidson & Tolich, 2003). Making explicit how the research was analysed, and the assumptions that influenced that analysis, allow for research to be evaluated or positioned in comparison to other studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, after gathering data from five teacher interviews, 12 children’s portfolios and a range of centre documentation, it was apparent a systematic approach was needed to carefully manage and interpret the large amount of qualitative material (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). To help, a thematic approach to analysis was employed. This section describes the data analysis process that guided this study. First, themes evident in the study will be explained. Then, the conceptual frameworks utilised for data analysis and interpretation will be outlined.

**Themes evident in the data**

Analysing data thematically involves identifying, analysing and reporting themes in what has been expressed and recorded (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ezzy, 2002; Merriam, 2009). Themes are defined as significant aspects of the data that relate to the research questions, and patterns of meaning in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is employed once most of the data has been collected (Ezzy, 2002). In this study, identifying themes in the data, rather than predetermining them before data collection, ensured that the voices of participants, rather than my own, were foregrounded in the process. As such, teachers expressed varied beliefs and understandings about assessing infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions with families.

Once most of my interview transcripts were ready, I began the thematic process using Braun and Clarke (2006) to engage in several sequential processes. First, I familiarised myself with the data by reading through each interview transcript a couple of times, alongside a copy of my research aims. At the same time, I listened to the relevant audio
file, to ensure teachers’ voices were captured verbatim. Then, I generated initial codes, by noting down which sections of text related to the topics of my research aims: learning dispositions, assessment and family involvement.

Following this, I searched for themes by determining which key words were similar and/or the same. I then reviewed, refined, defined, and named these themes. I did this by using a word processing programme that enabled me to move highlighted excerpts around that fit with a relevant theme, and to discard ones that did not. These themes were finalised as the centre and home as disposition-enhancing environments, the role of the teacher in fostering infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions and the nature of collaboration with families in assessment. Chapter four presents my analysis of the data organised by these themes. After this process of exploration and refinement, I felt thematic analysis helped to highlight the significance of each theme and enhance the manageability of the data.

Subsequently, I applied conceptual frameworks to theorise any comparisons and further the analysis.

**Conceptual frameworks for data analysis and interpretation**

A conceptual or theoretical framework provides an underlying structure or organising frame for interpreting and analysing data, based on the paradigmatic orientation underpinning the research (Merriam, 2009). In this study, two conceptual frameworks, underpinned by sociocultural theory, were employed to interpret and analyse teachers’ expressed and subjective understandings. These frameworks aligned with the interpretivist research paradigm of this study. Claxton and Carr’s (2004) sociocultural notion of a potentiating environment, as introduced in Chapter two and to be discussed further in Chapter four, has been used to organise and present the findings. Carr’s (2002b) sociocultural notions of assessment relating to competence, continuity, and community, as introduced in Chapter two and to be explained in Chapter five, were subsequently used to ensure a sociocultural representation of how teachers’ understood the involvement of families when assessing the learning dispositions of infants and toddlers. Interpreting the findings through such lenses also allows this study to be scrutinised by, and contribute to, the research community.
Ensuring the trustworthiness of the study

The aim of trustworthiness in interpretive research is to ensure the results of any study can be relied upon and will sufficiently reflect people’s constructed realities. Terms such as validity, reliability, and objectivity, often associated with positivist research that focuses on objective and scientific approaches, are replaced by Guba and Lincoln’s (1989) criteria relevant to interpretivist, qualitative research. In this section, the notions of credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability are discussed.

Credibility

Credibility refers to verifying the soundness of a study’s findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), essential if findings are to be relied on. Techniques such as triangulation increase the confidence in the findings producing credible results. Triangulation, the use of multiple sources of data, supports research credibility. Drawing on multiple sources of evidence enables an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon to be gained (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and enhances the trustworthiness and accuracy of interpretations (Davidson & Tolich, 2003; Yin, 2003). In this study, data was triangulated through data collected from interviews, documentation and field notes. This process supported the interpretive nature of this study and helped to enhance the in-depth and rich description of teachers’ understandings.

Transferability

As the aim of interpretivist case study research is to understand individual cases in depth, the thoroughness of the investigation, rather than how well results can be generalised or transferred, should be emphasised (Stake, 1995). Therefore, the thick, rich descriptions from thoroughly examining case studies, of which sample sizes can be small, should be valued for their ability to illuminate readers’ understandings in ways other research types might not (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2005). In addition, case study research encourages readers to make decisions about the relevance of research findings (Merriam, 2009). This transferability refers to the degree to which findings can be applied to other contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In relation to the transferability of this study, it is envisaged that the rich description to come from it will be useful for, and resonate with, teachers in other contexts.
Confirmability and dependability

Confirmability is another criterion for trustworthiness and refers to an assurance that data, interpretations and findings are shaped more by the participants and their context, than by the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Supporting this assurance ensures research has dependability, which requires that the research process has an audit trail or is able to be tracked through confirmable documentation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). However, it must also be acknowledged that researcher effects in any research involving people are inevitable (McLachlan, 2010). To assist with confirmability and dependability, the research process, including methods for data collection, should be well-explained. This explication enables readers to make links between data collected and analysed and provides an assurance that researcher effects are minimised. For this study, the selection of participants, data gathering techniques, and methods of data analysis, including conceptual frameworks, were explained in detail. Furthermore, the appendices provide evidence to support these explanations.

Conclusion

This chapter has explained and justified the interpretivist paradigm underpinning this investigation into the topic of teachers’ understandings about the involvement of families in assessing the learning dispositions of infants and toddlers. The research context, site, and participants were described. Ethical considerations of informed consent, confidentiality and minimisation of risks, and benefits for participants were outlined. Qualitative, case study data gathering techniques, including interviews, centre documentation and field notes, were described. Data analysis procedures were considered. Finally, issues of trustworthiness were outlined.

The next chapter

The following chapter presents the findings of this study, informed by data from the individual interviews, centre documentation, and my field notes. The description of the data is framed within Claxton and Carr’s (2004) sociocultural notion of a potentiating environment, which helped to describe an in-depth picture of teachers’ understandings regarding aspects of their practice. Notably, it also helped to highlight the RIE philosophy as an influencing factor on these understandings.
Chapter Four
FINDINGS

Introduction

In this study, I set out to explore the nature of a group of teachers’ understandings about the cultivation and assessment of learning dispositions, and the involvement of families in these notions. The previous chapter described the research process and methods of data analysis, which revealed a multiplicity of ideas and understandings that were varied and complex. Thus, a conceptual framework was sought to provide an appropriate set of ideas through which teachers’ multiple perspectives could be presented.

Conceptual framework

Claxton and Carr’s (2004) potentiating environment was utilised as the conceptual framework in this chapter, because of its relevance to the aims of this study, and its ability to illustrate teachers’ perspectives. As discussed in Chapter two, a potentiating environment presents learners with opportunities that invite, support and encourage the expression of particular dispositional responses (Claxton & Carr, 2004). Teachers actively promote such responses by talking about them with children, sharing documented records of such responses with children, and modelling similar responses as they interact with children. Furthermore, teachers actively seek out families’ perspectives to support these processes further and to enable children’s dispositions to be supported beyond the early childhood setting.

Claxton and Carr’s (2004) potentiating environment helped to illuminate three central themes in the data, which are used to organise this chapter. In section one, I describe the findings that relate to the theme of the centre and home as disposition-enhancing environments. In section two, I describe the findings that relate to the theme of the teacher’s role in fostering learning dispositions. Then, in section three, I describe the findings that relate to the theme of teachers’ collaboration with families in relation to assessment. Finally, this chapter concludes with a summary of the key findings, drawn together to answer the three research questions developed in Chapter two to guide this research.
Throughout this chapter, abbreviations are used to justify the findings and acknowledge the source of the data. Teacher interview data will be abbreviated as (TI, p.#). Centre documentation, such as children’s portfolio material or the centre philosophy statement, will be abbreviated as (CD). Finally, field notes will be abbreviated as (FN).

**Section one: The centre and home as disposition-enhancing environments**

This section describes teachers’ views about the centre and home as disposition-enhancing environments. First, findings related to the centre setting as an influence are presented. Teachers’ views about the home setting as an influence are described. Finally, this section concludes with some key findings, analysed in relation to Claxton and Carr’s (2004) potentiating environment.

**The centre setting as an influence on the development of dispositions**

Teachers believed the centre environment provided infants and toddlers with several opportunities to stimulate their dispositional learning. These opportunities included observing and imitating peers in play and engaging in autonomous play in a well-prepared physical play space.

Two teachers believed that observing the play of peers was influential to individual children’s dispositions. For example, in an interview discussion, Milan talked about a child climbing play equipment and made a link between the child’s disposition “to give it a go” and what the child had learned from watching a peer who had achieved the same challenge.

*She’s seen other children going on top… maybe that encouraged her so I’ll give it a go, I’ll give it a try (Milan, TI, p.11).*

Sarah believed that the observation of older children’s play was influential on younger children’s dispositions, namely their dispositions to show an interest and to be playful.

*Like the little ones I’ve noticed, the bigger kids do something and they sort of want to follow that, the little ones… for example if it’s one child takes a handbag and starts walking and you can watch everyone observing them and then taking an interest and trying to do the same thing and then we have next minute a whole room of kids with bags walking (Sarah, TI, p.3).*
These views reveal these teachers’ belief that peers were influential in the development of multiple dispositions. However, this social influence was not emphasised in children’s portfolio documentation. Instead, most of the documentation that featured dispositions, such as curiosity, persistence, and exploration, focused on children’s independent activities (CD), revealing a focus on the individual learner engaging with his/her own environment. This focus seemed to support teachers’ emphasis on the physical environment as another influence on children’s dispositions.

Hannah suggested that a prepared environment, with few restrictions on movement and play and interesting things to manipulate, provided children with opportunities to engage in dispositional learning, such as to be curious, to try things out and notably, to explore.

*Free movement, free play... allows children to actually show an interest... how the environment is set up gives them ways to ... use things in so many different ways, try things out and not worry what the result is... just giving them that space and time to explore... an important learning disposition (Hannah, TI, p.6).*

My observations of the children’s play space, set up with everyday play objects, (e.g., small containers, chains, and baskets) and low shelving for access, supported Hannah’s view of a prepared environment (FN).

Furthermore, Sarah expressed a different view by emphasising a changing environment, rather than a prepared one, as per Hannah’s view, as influential to children’s disposition to explore.

*We set up the environment like that, that gives them, it changes every day so it’s sort of they want to explore (Sarah, TI, p.5).*

These views suggest that some teachers believed the centre setting played a role in stimulating infants’ and toddlers’ dispositional learning, namely with regards to observing and imitating their peers and exploring resources in a well prepared play space. In addition, teachers also suggested the home had some influence on dispositional learning, findings of which will now be presented.
The home setting as an influence on the development of dispositions

Teachers in the current study had few views about how, or the degree to which, the home setting influenced infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions. Teachers referred to siblings as having some influence on children’s dispositional learning in the centre. However, these views were more general than specific. For example, Hannah commented generally that siblings in the home could influence learning dispositions (TI, p.3). Similarly, Sarah believed that children who have brothers and sisters appear more confident to explore and independent in the centre, yet did not elaborate on how siblings enhanced confidence.

You can see kids who have come from brothers and sisters and they’re sort of happily exploring and more confident, doing the stuff for themselves (Sarah, TI, p.4)

In contrast, Nelly believed that the home and family were highly influential on children’s dispositions. She articulated that learning dispositions have multiple influences, and can transfer from one setting to another; they are first shaped by families and then continue to be shaped or modified by other children and teachers in the early childhood setting. Significantly, Nelly’s comment reveals an awareness of the complexity of the learning disposition construct.

[Learning dispositions] comes from the things they’re exposed to, their attitudes towards the things they’re exposed to and obviously very much ... are influenced by the home life, the family, the personalities at home as well and then bringing that into an early childhood setting where you’ve got children with different backgrounds, different learning dispositions and you’ve got teachers with different passions about things (Nelly, T1, p.2).

My close reading of children’s portfolios revealed multiple references to families, mostly in documentation about children’s developmental milestones (e.g., birthdays and tasting new foods), and centre events involving families (e.g., children starting the centre, grandparents’ afternoon tea, or the family picnic) (CD). In contrast, families and home settings were understated in most of the documentation collected that mentioned learning dispositions (CD).
Summary
The findings described in this section reveal teachers had mixed views regarding the centre and home settings as influential to children’s dispositional learning. Teachers emphasised children’s observation and imitation of peers and engagement in autonomous play as the main ways dispositional learning, such as curiosity, persistence, and exploration, could be stimulated in the centre. However, teachers’ references to dispositions were largely indirect rather than direct. Nelly was the only teacher to reveal an understanding of the home as a main influence. Portfolio documentation understated references to families and instead, emphasised children’s engagement in independent activities, with some references to dispositional learning, such as exploration, curiosity, and persistence. Significantly, teachers’ emphasis on peer observation, uninterrupted play, and independence in documentation, seemed to be consistent with RIE.

What is more, teachers’ views about the centre environment as influential to dispositional learning aligned somewhat with Claxton and Carr’s (2004) potentiating environment, which proposes that the environment invites, supports, and encourages the expression of particular dispositions. In contrast, teachers’ views about the home did not align, and, consequently, could not be considered as disposition-enhancing. Also part of a potentiating environment, the active role of the teacher in fostering dispositions will now be considered in light of research findings.

Section two: The role of the teacher in fostering learning dispositions
In a potentiating environment, the adult is active in fostering dispositional learning (Claxton & Carr, 2004). In this section, I describe the findings in relation to four roles of the teacher related to the fostering of infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions. These roles include the facilitation of play to promote dispositions, accessing resources for assessment, observing children, and documenting/responding to/following up on dispositional learning. The section concludes with some key findings related to Claxton and Carr’s (2004) role of the teacher as part of a potentiating environment.

The facilitation of children’s play to promote particular dispositions
Teachers believed their role was to provide infants and toddlers with opportunities to engage in play, with minimal interactions with them during this time. Sarah mentioned
that providing children with time for uninterrupted play stimulated their dispositions to 
explore and to investigate.

Uninterrupted play… I don’t go and interrupt them, I’m just sitting back and 
watching… gives them freedom of choice to do what they like. They know that 
we’re watching them so we are there for them if they need us… they know that 
we’re not going to go in between and pull them out… they have their own time 
to explore, investigate… (Sarah, TI, p.4).

Sarah’s emphasis on the notion of uninterrupted play and sitting back and watching 
aligned with the RIE philosophy.

The importance of teachers not intervening in play was further supported by Milan and 
Hannah, who suggested that children learned best when they explored independently 
and worked things out for themselves. Teachers believed their role was to provide 
opportunities for children to be autonomous, thus fostering the dispositions to be 
independent and to problem-solve. They also adopted a view of learning as a naturally 
occuring process.

If we do something for them what they can learn? … we have to provide 
involvement for them, to support them and it’s all on them to carry on. (Milan, 
TI, p.2)

We don’t do things for them… we provide the opportunity for them to work 
things out themselves (Hannah, TI, p.4).

My observation of teachers during a centre visit confirmed this non-interventionist role 
of the teacher during play.

When I came in, I noticed the teachers sitting peripheral to children’s play, 
observing children from afar as they played and explored. When children 
approached them, teachers verbally responded but remained seated on the 
outskirts of the play. In general, teachers and children appeared calm and 
content (FN).

It was therefore apparent from these views that teachers promoted RIE’s notion of 
uninterrupted play, and minimised their interactions with children during this time. 
This approach to learning and teaching, appeared to promote a range of dispositions,
including curiosity, persistence, exploration, investigation, and significantly, independence, and autonomy. At the same time, it supported a view of learning as naturally evolving. The influence of RIE was also seen in teachers’ views about the resources they used to support their assessment practices.

**Accessing resources to inform assessment**

Another role of the teacher, evident in the data, concerned the resources and professional learning opportunities teachers used to support their assessment of dispositional learning. All teachers indicated they had access to a range of resources. Milan explained that teachers had access to *Te Whāriki* as well as RIE books, including ones by Gerber.

Yes *Te Whāriki* and also we’ve got lots of RIE books like for Pennie Brownlee, Magda Gerber (Milan, TI, p.3-4).

Sarah, on the other hand, endorsed *Te Whāriki* as an important document, and referred to some exemplars, which were likely to have been *Kei tua o te pae*, as Rosa indicated the centre had them.

*I always go back to Te Whāriki and look at those learning outcomes. That sort of exploration, communication... Te Whāriki would play a fairly important role and those exemplars I go through them sometimes* (Sarah, TI, p.7).

Rosa was less clear about the books they had in the centre but was sure there was a range to choose from, including *Kei tua o te pae*.

Yeah we’ve got lots of books and we’ve got *Kei tua o te pae*. I wouldn’t know off the top of my head the names of them (Rosa, TI, p.1).

Nelly emphasised *Te Whāriki* as her guide for assessment and learning stories. She also referred to having used DOPs in the past. Information from a range of sources other than books was also suggested.

*The biggest one that I refer to and do in all my learning stories is Te Whāriki... DOPs I used to refer to that... readings...information...like conferences and...professional development* (Nelly, TI, p.5).
Hannah also suggested a range of resources when asked what resources influenced her assessment, including ones related to the RIE philosophy. She also considered discussions with parents as a resource.

DEFINITELY TE WHĀRIKI … KEI TUA O TE PAE, ALSO ALL THE GERBER, PIKLER THOSE SORT OF BOOKS I THINK ARE REALLY IMPORTANT…TALKING TO OTHER TEACHERS, EVEN PARENTS… (HANNAH, TI, P.6).

Hannah then explained that she had attended multiple RIE professional learning courses. She stated that she used the video material to guide her observations, assessment, and focus on children’s development as a naturally unfolding process.

I’VE BEEN TO A FEW PIKLER AND RIE COURSES AND WHEN THEY’VE DONE THE VIDEOS I USUALLY WRITE DOWN KEY THINGS THAT THEY TALK ABOUT … DEVELOPING MOVEMENT… LIKE THE NATURAL UNFOLDING OF THEIR DEVELOPMENT AND THAT SORT OF THING AND THINK OF WHAT THEY ARE TELLING US TO OBSERVE AND I WRITE DOWN THOSE KEY POINTS AND HAVE THEM UP NEXT TO MY COMPUTER AT HOME… IF I’M SEEING SOMETHING THAT RELATES TO THAT I’LL TRY AND… WORD IT IN A WAY… I’VE SEEN IT… ON THE VIDEO HOW THEY DO IT…I DO USE IT TO ASSESS CHILDREN’S LEARNING (HANNAH, TI, P.6).

It is evident from these views that teachers are very much guided by RIE in their assessment practices, even with access to Te Whāriki and the assessment exemplars Kei tua o te pae. Only one teacher considered families as a resource in assessment of children’s dispositional learning.

**Observing children to understand their dispositional learning**

Observation of children was emphasised as another key role of the teacher. Sarah clarified that teachers had responsibility for focusing on the children who were in their primary caregiving groups, with minimal input or involvement from other teachers. She also explained that while primary caregivers were the main assessors of their children, teachers could also assess children in other groups to ensure no child was missed, but this was not expected.

WE TRY TO DO FOR OUR KIDS AND IF POSSIBLE FOR OTHER KIDS BUT WE CONCENTRATE MORE ON OUR PRIMARY CAREGIVING KIDS BECAUSE… EVERYONE MIGHT END UP DOING ONE CHILD (SARAH, TI, P.10).
Rosa believed that as primary caregivers, they had focused time to observe children and, in turn, came to know children well, while also enhancing their awareness of how well a child’s learning dispositions were progressing.

[Primary caregiving] gives time for teachers to observe the child and really get to know the child... like how the child is doing with their dispositions because you know the child better (Rosa, TI, p.2).

Sarah articulated that she observed what children did, what they noticed, and what they showed an interest in, as part of the process of identifying their learning dispositions. As noted earlier, the teacher’s role of sitting back to observe was again mentioned by Sarah, as was her approach of documenting a child’s learning dispositions as they emerged during their play.

You sit back and just watch what they’re doing. For example, if I’m doing a learning story then I’m just waiting to see what the child first starts noticing and then slowly going, taking interest... curiosity (Sarah, TI, p.3).

Nelly was the only teacher who articulated her understandings about observing progress in dispositional learning. She emphasised spending time with children, knowing who they are, and observing these changes as part of recognising progress.

[Progress in learning dispositions is] ... something that’s new for them or something that’s an interest for them or growth that I’m seeing in that child so it could be how they’re becoming more confident in a group situation from being the observer when they first come into the group to wanting to participate, to actively participating and to then actively leading, just that progression would be something that when you know you’ve spent time with them, when you know who they are and you see those things happening (Nelly, TI, p.4).

Therefore, based on the data, it was evident that teachers emphasised the role of the teacher as a non-participant observer during children’s uninterrupted play. This role seemed to be influenced by teachers’ primary caregiving responsibilities, as consistent with RIE. Teachers’ observation of children appeared to give them opportunities to identify dispositional learning in children’s play. Nelly was the only teacher to articulate a good understanding of observing progress in dispositional learning.
Documenting/responding to/following up on dispositional learning

Teachers had mixed views regarding how to document, respond to and follow up on their interpretations of infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions. Milan, for example, suggested that dispositional learning, once documented, could be further supported with the facilitation of a “nice” learning experience to foster the child’s disposition to persevere.

*We try to extend their interest, to extend their knowledge. The main thing we do is just write a story and then try to set up nice learning involvement for them to keep going* (Milan, TI, p.3).

Nelly referred to the facilitation of an emotionally secure environment as a way to respond to dispositional learning. She also believed that focusing on dispositional learning enhanced her understandings of children’s capabilities and how and why they approach their learning, which helped her determine how best to support their learning patterns and interests.

*It’s really important to focus on learning dispositions... to understand the child... to know how they’re responding in situations... why they’re responding in those situations and to be able to create the most secure environment for them to honestly express themselves and to genuinely learn about themselves as well as their capabilities* (Nelly, TI, p.4).

Rosa explained the way their learning stories were structured, that at least one learning disposition was to be documented, and made reference to planning when she mentioned opportunities and possibilities, yet this reference was not elaborated on.

*We do three parts to our learning stories so the story, what learning is happening here, and the future opportunities and possibilities and so we would document it in the what learning is happening here. We’d normally write at least one learning disposition in each story as well as something how it connects to Te Whāriki* (Rosa, TI, p.1).

Rosa’s reference to *Te Whāriki* was supported by teachers’ earlier views of the resources available to support them in their assessment of dispositional learning.
As clarified in the previous chapter, the portfolio documentation gathered for this study was selected based on references to learning dispositions and/or families. The sample I gathered represents only some of the contents of the 12 portfolios I had access to, revealing that not every learning story referred to dispositional learning (FN). Further, in some of the learning stories collected, teachers had documented their intentions or plans to follow up on what had been documented. A common response was to ensure play resources would be made available again for the child, with no specified link to dispositions. Only one example was collected that documented teachers’ intention to follow up on the dispositional learning that had been identified in that story. An excerpt from that story reveals an intention to foster Caitlin’s disposition to be independent, yet with no specific detail about how this would occur.

> What learning is happening here? Caitlin has become so happy and independent and really knows her mind! What next? We will continue to foster Caitlin’s sense of belonging, and help her spread her wings and develop her independence (CD).

In this and other cases, there was no documented evidence found or collected to demonstrate how or when these intentions were implemented or followed up on. Notably, nor was any evidence found or collected regarding how families’ perspectives were sought to inform these documented interpretations or how families were involved in enacting these intentions at home.

**Summary**

The findings described in this section suggest that teachers believed their key roles were to promote uninterrupted play and to engage in non-participant observation during this play, both notions of which are consistent with RIE. In carrying out these roles, the dispositions to explore, to investigate, and importantly, to be independent, and to be autonomous were able to be fostered, which is also consistent with RIE’s emphasis on independent exploration and autonomy.

Significantly, teachers did not actively seek out families’ perspectives to inform their observations and interpretations of children’s dispositional learning. Only one teacher out of the five referred to parents as a resource in assessment. Teachers appeared guided by RIE in their observations and assessment practices, despite having access to
other resources, including Te Whāriki. Further, Nelly was the only teacher to reveal a good understanding of progress in dispositional learning.

As teachers were not active in the promotion of dispositional responses, the role of the teacher in this setting did not align with a potentiating environment (Claxton & Carr, 2004). How teachers approached families in assessment is another important theme in the findings, which will now be described.

Section three: The nature of teachers’ collaboration with families in assessment

Families are a recognised factor in a potentiating environment (Claxton & Carr, 2004). In this section, I describe teachers’ views about their collaboration with families in assessment, organised by two key notions: strategies to encourage the involvement of families and perceived barriers to assessment and documentation. This section concludes with some key findings as they relate to Claxton and Carr’s (2004) consideration for families as part of a potentiating environment.

Strategies to encourage the involvement of families

Teachers referred to parents as an important participant in assessment. For example, as part of a discussion about who should be involved in assessment of learning dispositions, Sarah stressed a partnership between teachers and parents.

Parents and teachers... because I think parents and us play equal parts in their lives (Sarah, TI, p.7).

Similarly, Rosa highlighted the apparent connection that exists between the centre and children’s homes.

We’ve got such a big connection with home and centre they can share... parents can share towards their learning dispositions, what they’re up to at home with their family (Rosa, TI, p.3).

This strong connection was apparent when I noted the very friendly exchanges between some families and teachers during my centre visits (FN). Yet, my analysis of some of the learning stories in children’s portfolios revealed minimal involvement of families and instead, highlighted teachers as the main assessors (CD), which, as noted earlier,
was a responsibility that was influenced by being primary caregiver of particular children.

In the findings that follow, teachers appeared to have made attempts to involve families in assessment. However, these methods did not appear to engage families in assessment of their child’s dispositional learning in significant ways.

**Email, templates, and learning stories**

Rosa believed email was a convenient way to communicate with parents. However, she believed that some families were unwilling to contribute by email, and acknowledged that it can be challenging. While Rosa offered to show me email evidence, she was unable to access any on her computer at the time (FN).

> Some parents don’t email back, you can send an email they won’t email back. It’s a little tricky, they don’t really want to contribute. I feel like we’ve got a really good group of parents though, sometimes it’s harder than other times (Rosa, TI, p.6).

A few families used blank teacher-initiated templates left for them in their child’s portfolio, such as “Family Voice”, “Parents’ Voice”, “Stories from home”, and “Grandparents’ Voice” (CD). In some of these, families wrote about their child’s interests in the home (e.g., a love of books, naming body parts, and dancing). Yet, there was no evidence found or collected of how teachers had responded to any of these families’ contributions. Significantly, this lack of evidence appeared to suggest one-way sharing of information, from families to teachers.

Rosa also explained that she invited families to contribute comments on the learning story of their child. These were emailed to families with explanations of their child’s experiences in the centre, and an indication of how those comments would be used.

> I just say to the parents when I email them... here’s a story about [a child] doing such and such and feel free to forward it to your family and friends... if you have any response or comments or anything... reply back to me and I’ll cut and paste them and attach them to a story at the end... I’ll just do like a little parent’s voice from what they’ve emailed back (Rosa, TI, p.3).
While families were offered a choice to contribute, there was no evidence to suggest Rosa communicated the importance of their contributions. In addition, Rosa revealed a one-way sharing of assessment documentation, from centre to home, without acknowledging the home as a primary source of assessment information about their child.

Conversations with families

Teachers emphasised discussions as another strategy for involving families in assessment. The importance of discussions with families was supported by the centre’s philosophy statement, which expected teachers to discuss the child’s day, learning, and development.

*High teacher ratios allow for teachers to have daily conversations about their child’s day, learning and development (CD).*

However, Sarah believed that families were too busy to engage in discussions about their child’s learning, and highlighted this challenge by claiming that:

*Some parents are so busy, it’s just a drop and they go, some parents are good, they sort of sit and like to know what the child did (Sarah, TI, p.7).*

Rosa explained that some parents initiated discussions with teachers during the day, which at times could be up to an hour.

*Some parents love to take the time like [Parent’s name] loves to take the time to chat. She’ll talk to me for an hour or she’ll talk to another teacher for an hour or she’ll just make her rounds (Rosa, TI, p.6).*

This duration seemed to indicate parents who were willing to talk as well as highlight the potential for teachers to discuss aspects of their child’s learning with families. However, the focus of Rosa’s conversations was not made clear.

On the other hand, Nelly revealed that she did engage in discussions with families focused on children’s dispositional learning, and when she did, she deliberately adapted her language so that it was less technical and more family-friendly. Technical language generally refers to the early childhood-specific terminology not commonly used with people outside the profession. Nelly explained that this change in language was a
deliberate strategy when discussing dispositions with families, and revealed her discussions included seeking families’ perspectives on interactive experiences at home.

*I know that if you said learning dispositions they’d [families] go oh because it’s a technical term but then if you had a conversation with them, hey what’s your child’s interests, what do they like, ... what are some things that you notice about them, what are they doing at home, how does...your family respond to that and... what are those interactions like at home* (Nelly, TI, p.5-6).

Nelly was the only teacher to indicate that she engaged in disposition-related discussions with families, and sought their perspectives as part of these discussions.

Sarah indicated that her face-to-face conversations with families in the mornings focused on children’s care routines, which helped take over the role of parents. This approach is also consistent with RIE, and supports a primary caregiving approach.

*Once they come here we are their family ... as soon as parents come first thing we ask is how was the child’s night... our role continues from mum and dad because we ask the parents how the child slept... ate* (Sarah, TI, p.5).

Milan believed that conversations with families stimulated some families’ interest in wanting to continue the dispositional learning identified in the centre, at home. She explained that after discussing with a parent her child’s problem-solving experience, the parent came back to her stating she had followed what Milan had done in the centre at home. However, again this revealed one-way information sharing, from centre to home, with no visible evidence of actively seeking families’ perspectives to inform the child’s learning in the centre.

*We give her opportunities to problem solve. She does it by herself so yeah mum notices that. That's what she said, I follow what you do, I do it at home* (Milan, TI, p.11-12).

It is evident from these findings that teachers held families in high in relation to assessment and in general, and employed multiple methods to communicate with them. Assessment documentation shared between teachers and families revealed a one-way process. Conversations with families were revealed as a main method of collaboration and appeared to focus on children’s care routines, but not dispositional learning, despite
some parents showing an interest in their child’s dispositional learning. Significantly, RIE and teachers’ primary caregiving responsibilities appeared to influence their conversations and documentation sharing with families. It is, however, also possible that in addition to RIE, teachers’ views about assessment and documentation influenced the ways in which they collaborated with families, as will now be described.

**Teachers’ views about barriers to assessment and documentation**

Two barriers influencing teachers’ collaboration with families were identified. First, teachers perceived they had limited time to assess and document; this will be discussed first. Second, teachers perceived that families were too tired, busy, and unwilling to contribute, to be discussed second.

**Limited time to assess and document**

Time for assessment or documentation was a recurring topic of tension for all teachers, and played a key role in how children’s learning dispositions were assessed, documented, and discussed with family. For example, Sarah believed that limited time restricted her ability to connect or extend on her learning stories.

> Sometimes because of the time limit we don’t connect the stories you know like extend the stories (Sarah, TI, p.6).

One teacher believed that her time to document, which was referred to as non-contact time, was impacted by low teacher to child ratios which meant having to replace teachers who were away. Non-contact time generally refers to the non-teaching time given to teachers to perform duties other than teaching. Consequently, Sarah felt that it was easier to just take work home but, at times, also found this challenging if home was busy.

> I think here we’re not getting real proper non-contact... because of the child and teachers ratios or sometimes we will have planned for a non-contact but some staff will be away so then... most of the stuff... we just take it home and do work  but sometimes it’s so busy at home (Sarah, TI, 11).

Taking work home meant that opportunities to discuss and collaborate with teachers and families were limited.
Milan faced similar issues and believed that her non-contact time was influenced by her emotional connections to her primary caregiving children. She believed that hearing the cry of one of her primary care children affected her concentration if she was having her non-contact time in the centre. In turn, she stated that this influenced her to take her work home also.

> Even if we have time I can’t concentrate here because if one child starts to cry oh I know my check on baby, ... I can’t concentrate so I prefer using my own time which will be at home (Milan, TI, p.14).

On the other hand, Milan clarified that collaboration with other teachers did occur and happened informally during the day, sometimes when they were on a break and sometimes when they were in the playroom.

My experience with organising teachers’ interviews endorsed teachers’ commitment to children, which appeared to have stemmed from their primary caregiving relationships with children.

> Interviews were held in centre. Teachers indicated to me that if they were needed for ‘their’ children, they would have to stop the interview. Before and during each interview, I was nervous, hoping we could get through the interviews without interruption. At times, I felt anxious as it had already taken a bit of juggling with the centre manager to organise the interviews. However, I couldn’t help but admire their commitment to children and their centre philosophy (FN).

It is evident from these findings that teachers’ primary caregiving relationships, which are consistent with RIE, influenced teachers’ non-contact time for assessment purposes in the centre. This issue left teachers documenting without input from other teachers or families.

**Families as being unwilling, busy, or too tired to contribute**

Teachers believed that involving families in assessment was challenging. These views included families being unwilling, busy, or too tired to contribute their perspectives. Rosa commented that parents were sometimes unwilling to fill out documentation, believing the parent was somewhat put out by the request.
It’s really hard to get, like if you send home, well I find that if I send home a form like a parent’s voice like I don’t know there’s something about a tangible piece of paper they just don’t want to fill out (Rosa, TI, p.6).

Sarah recognised the busy lives of parents as an obstacle to them contributing to documentation.

They just send it blank and sometimes [I ask] could you please write something and stuff like that... some parents... they’re so busy [but] they say okay (Sarah, TI, p.13).

Hannah believed that working parents are tired, so she chose to record parents’ comments on their behalf, revealing her commitment to gaining the voice of the parent, despite challenges.

Sending home the parent’s voice sheet that they feel they have to fill out, they’re tired... then I would write...in their book what was said, ...the story and sort of inter weaving it and I was talking to your mum the other day [child] and that sort of thing... I guess there’s always more we could do with involving families (Hannah, TI, p.10).

Hannah’s view, that there was more they could do to involve families, revealed a consideration for the challenging nature of involving families.

**Summary**

This section has shown that teachers made attempts to collaborate with families in various ways, highlighting conversations as a main method. These conversations seemed to emphasise care routines, as consistent with RIE, but not dispositional learning. Only one teacher, Nelly, appeared to use such discussions as opportunities to discuss dispositional learning. While there was some evidence of families being willing to be involved in assessment-related practices, teachers did not appear to seek or inform their understandings about their child’s dispositional learning. Furthermore, teachers’ perceived barriers to assessment and documentation, namely time and views about families, resulted in limited collaboration with families, and, in turn, further limited the opportunities for families to engage in discussions about their child’s dispositional learning.
Therefore, based on these findings, the nature of teachers’ collaboration with families was not consistent with Claxton and Carr’s (2004) notion of a potentiating environment, which acknowledges the importance of collaborating with families to fostering their children’s dispositional learning in and beyond the early childhood setting.

**Conclusion: Answering the research questions**

Overall, the findings presented in this chapter represented evidence of teachers’ understandings of families’ involvement of assessment of learning dispositions, as they occurred in an everyday setting. This chapter used Claxton and Carr’s (2004) notion of a potentiating environment to describe teachers’ views about the role of the environment, the teachers, and families, in the fostering of learning dispositions. Overall, the findings revealed that, in the participating centre of this study, teachers’ approach to assessing dispositional learning was not consistent with all of the characteristics of a potentiating environment. Significantly, the RIE philosophy revealed itself to be a significant influence on various aspects of teachers’ practice. The aims and questions of this research are now addressed directly in relation to the key findings expressed in this chapter.

Each question is addressed in summary form as follows:

The first question was: **What do teachers understand regarding how infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions are cultivated?**

Milan and Sarah believed that dispositions, such as being interested, persistent, and exploratory, emerged naturally as children observed and imitated the play of their peers, while Hannah and Sarah believed that exploration of the resources and the physical layout stimulated children’s dispositions to be curious and to explore. Sarah, Milan, and Hannah expressed the importance of teachers not intervening in children’s play, a view which appeared to support children’s autonomy and independence, as consistent with RIE. Nelly was the only teacher to reveal an understanding of the significant role played by the home setting and families in the cultivation of infants’ and toddlers’ dispositional learning, as established in the literature. Nelly was also the only one to demonstrate an understanding of the complexity of the learning disposition construct from a sociocultural perspective, as consistent with Te Whāriki.
Overall, teachers emphasised children’s independent exploration and autonomous engagement in play as a main way to cultivate dispositional learning. This view is consistent with RIE, which proposes that learning evolves naturally, without intervention, and is best supported through uninterrupted play. In contrast, this view sits at odds with *Te Whāriki*’s assertion that learning dispositions are mediated through interactions and relationships.

The second question was: **In what ways do teachers understand assessment of infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions?**

All of the teachers referred to a range of resources to inform their assessment practices, including *Te Whāriki* and *Kei tua o te pae*. Still, RIE resources were revealed as a main influence on their assessment. In addition, their role as primary caregivers seemed to influence their emphasis on observation as a non-participant in children’s play. Teachers also emphasised documentation, including learning stories, as a main approach to assessing learning related to independent activities. Teachers’ documentation was seemingly completed during non-contact time, which was often taken at home due to constraints engendered by being primary caregiver to particular children. Consequently, these issues appeared to limit teachers’ opportunities to collaborate with other teachers and families for the purposes of assessing their child’s dispositional learning. Teachers documented their plans to support children’s learning and, minimally, children’s learning dispositions, by suggesting future provision of play resources and ways of setting up the environment, but how or when these plans were implemented remains unclear. This approach reflected a more summative approach, rather than a formative approach, to assessing dispositional learning, as per the literature.

Overall, teachers did not actively foster dispositional learning through assessment, relying instead on children’s active exploration of the learning environment to stimulate dispositional learning. Notably, teachers’ implementation of a primary caregiving approach, which supports the implementation of RIE, influenced teachers to focus on observation and documentation as two key processes in assessment. Such a view of assessment sits at odds with *Te Whāriki*’s formative, relational, and multi-faceted approach to assessment.
The third question was: *How do teachers view the involvement of families in assessment of their infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions?*

Sarah and Rosa believed that families were important partners in assessment, but this view was not reflected in their assessment process or in children’s portfolio documentation. While teachers employed multiple methods aimed at engaging families in assessment, these strategies did not appear to engender a high level of involvement from families. Documentation-sharing was one-way, mainly from centre to home. Only one teacher, Nelly, appeared to actively discuss dispositional learning with families, adapting the disposition-related language she used to make it more accessible to them, as well as seeking their perspectives about their child.

Rosa, Sarah, and Hannah were challenged by the belief that families were unwilling, too busy, or too tired to contribute to assessment-related processes. In turn, these views appeared to influence their willingness to engage in discussions with families about their child’s dispositional learning and, as with the nature of their non-contact time, this limited families’ opportunities to be involved in assessment of their child’s dispositional learning. Teachers’ approach to assessment without the input from others and their care-based discussions with families seemed to be influenced by their primary caregiving relationships. RIE was therefore seen to be a significant influence on teachers’ views. However, the minimal involvement of families in assessment, and the one-way process of documentation, sat at odds with *Te Whāriki*’s promotion of strong, two-way partnerships with families in assessment.

**The next chapter**

In the next chapter, Carr’s (2002b) sociocultural notions for assessment of competence, continuity, and community will be utilised to interpret the apparent influencing nature of RIE on teachers’ views about aspects of their practice, with a particular focus on learning dispositions (competence), assessment (continuity), and families (community). Reference will be made to relevant literature.
Chapter five
DISCUSSION

Introduction

This thesis argues that *Te Whāriki*’s principle of involving families and communities in assessment is challenging to implement, particularly in practices guided by Gerber’s (1979) RIE philosophy. This issue arises from competing tensions in the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings, and associated views of teaching and learning, of RIE and *Te Whāriki*. This thesis set out to explore how a group of teachers, who were guided by RIE in one early childhood setting, made sense of the involvement of families in assessing the dispositional learning of infants and toddlers.

Claxton and Carr’s (2004) sociocultural notion of a potentiating environment was used in the previous chapter, to explore and illuminate teachers’ understandings about the cultivation and assessment of learning dispositions, and involvement of families in these notions. The findings exposed RIE as a significant influence on these understandings, revealing potential conflicts between the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of RIE and *Te Whāriki*. This chapter will focus particularly on the findings relating to RIE’s influence on teachers’ views about learning dispositions and assessment of dispositions, as well as the participation and involvement of families. It will include discussion on the tensions between RIE and *Te Whāriki* to highlight the problematic nature of implementing *Te Whāriki*’s principle of involving families and communities in assessment in the research setting of this study. Carr’s (2002b) sociocultural notions of assessment are utilised to facilitate this discussion.

Conceptual framework

Carr’s (2002b) overlapping sociocultural notions for assessment: competence, continuity, and community, introduced in Chapter two, highlight that assessment is distributed across teachers and families. Competence refers to a view of the child as a capable and competent learner, and dispositional learning is one aspect of that. Continuity in assessment is about learning as a continuous process, and documentation and discussions help to support that process. Finally, community refers to connections with families to enhance children’s learning.
Consistent with Carr (2002b), for the purposes of this chapter, discussions related to continuity and competence will each overlap with discussions related to community. In section one, competence and community will be used to interpret RIE’s influence on views about the dispositional learning of infants and toddlers (competence), clarify the tensions with *Te Whāriki*’s view of dispositional learning, and discuss the consequences of these views on the participation of families (community). In section two, continuity and community will be used to interpret RIE’s influence on teachers’ views related to assessing dispositions (continuity), clarify the dissonance with *Te Whāriki*’s approach to assessment, and discuss the consequences for the involvement of families (community). This chapter will conclude by considering whether the findings support the argument of this thesis. The original research question will also be addressed. Throughout this chapter, references to the findings of this study will be abbreviated as (F, p.#).

**Section one: Competence and Community: A RIE view of dispositional learning**

In this section, I interpret RIE’s influence on teachers’ views related to infants’ and toddlers’ dispositional learning (competence), clarify tensions with *Te Whāriki*, and discuss consequences for the involvement of families (community). This section is organised by two teacher-held views: learning dispositions from a developmental perspective, and learning dispositions through a RIE lens. This section will conclude with a summary of key ideas, with reference to Carr’s (2002b) notions of competence and community.

**Learning dispositions from a developmental perspective**

Consistent with the RIE philosophy, teachers emphasised the importance of uninterrupted play for children (F, p.50). The findings suggest that children’s active engagement in autonomous play was one of the main ways in which their dispositional learning could be fostered. According to RIE, uninterrupted play refers to a child’s play that is free of adult intervention or teaching, in order to promote concentration and a long attention span (Gerber & Johnson, 1998). The active role of the individual learner in their own development appears consistent with Piaget’s theoretical ideas on individual constructivism and cognitive development. Piaget proposed that children’s explorations of their world stimulated the child’s cognitive processes to construct
knowledge. He believed that these processes occurred at particular times and stages in a child’s life (Edwards, 2005; Gerber & Johnson, 1998). Piaget’s ideas support these teachers’ emphasis on autonomous and uninterrupted play as they, like Piaget, promoted the idea of the individual exploring his/her world independently as a way of learning.

Teachers’ emphasis on uninterrupted play also supported children’s free choice in learning. Sarah commented that freedom of choice allows children to do what they like (F, p.50). This approach to children’s learning aligns with RIE’s notion of free choice, whereby adults trust in children’s ability to make their own decisions in play (Gerber & Johnson, 1998). To support this approach, RIE encourages adults to observe more than they interact as a way of nurturing feelings of trust and security between adult and child.

In contrast to free choice, research highlighted the importance of children being guided in their decision-making as a more effective approach to learning (Blandford & Knowles, 2011). Blandford and Knowles explained that guided choice involves the teacher implementing a balanced approach to curriculum, whereby the child is encouraged to participate fully in making decisions about their learning, but is guided by the teacher at the same time. The active roles of the teacher and child enable learning to be co-constructed, a view supported by Te Whāriki when interpreted from a sociocultural perspective. Free choice, on the other hand, assigns the teacher a more passive role in children’s learning processes, supporting the child to actively construct his/her own learning. Thus, teachers in this study assigned the child full responsibility for his/her own learning during play, while promoting free choice in decision-making, an approach which is consistent with Piaget’s notion of individual constructivism, yet in tension with Te Whāriki’s view of learning as a social construction (MoE, 1996a).

Teachers supported children’s uninterrupted play and free choice by taking a non-interventionist role in their play. They did this by sitting back and watching children without interacting, explaining to me that this was a way to avoid interfering with children’s learning. Milan and Hannah clarified their support for such an approach by questioning whether children would learn anything if they did things for them (F, p.50). These views are consistent with the RIE philosophy, which believes that teachers’
interventions in children’s play are distractions and interruptions rather than beneficial to the child’s learning process (Gerber & Johnson, 1998).

In this study, the emphasis on children’s direct engagement with the environment, with little intervention from the teacher, seemed to assign the physical environment a more ‘active’ role than the teacher in stimulating children’s dispositional learning. The teacher was seen as having a more indirect role, namely as a provider of resources and facilitator of the physical environment. These findings suggest that teachers deliberately downplayed the importance of social interactions in play, consistent with RIE, in order to present themselves as peripheral, rather than integral, to children’s dispositional learning. Such a view contrasts with Te Whāriki’s emphasis on relationships, participation, and interactions as essential to the development of learning dispositions (MoE, 1996a).

Furthermore, the role of the non-intervening teacher has been argued as problematic. Stephen (2010) suggested that a reliance on Piagetian notions such as free choice, and active exploration of a prepared environment, with minimal interactions with teachers, can reflect a “laissez-faire approach” (p. 20), whereby learners are left to promote their own progress and learning. Stephen saw a need for teachers to consider the limitations of Piaget’s theoretical perspectives in relation to current understandings of how children learn. Stephen emphasised the importance of teachers thinking more critically about the influences of particular theoretical approaches on learning and development.

Similarly, my study builds on Stephen’s argument for a critically reflective approach, by suggesting teachers who implement the RIE philosophy alongside Te Whāriki might engage in dialogue about potential influences on aspects of practice. This is especially important in light of Stephen’s (2010) argument that Piaget’s theory has since been challenged and, thus revised as a result of more recent views about learning and teaching.

Stephen’s (2010) concerns are similar to a critique of RIE’s lack of an explicit theoretical framework (Horm, Goble, & Branscomb, 2012), though, as this study has shown, its views about teaching and learning are consistent with Piaget’s developmental perspective. Still, these arguments raise questions, pertinent to my study, over how well RIE developmental views about teaching and learning sit alongside a curriculum like Te Whāriki, and its sociocultural views of the same.
In this study, the notion of learning dispositions from a sociocultural perspective was not prominent in teachers’ views, despite sociocultural theory being promoted in *Te Whāriki*. Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory was a move away from Piaget’s emphasis on the individual, asserting the importance of learning through relationships with others. It regarded interactions between people as central to effective learning and important in young children’s play (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). Importantly, writers have suggested that active interactions and dialogue between teachers and young children enhance the co-construction of children’s learning dispositions (Daniels, 2011; Jordan, 2009). Daniels (2011) argued the point that adult-child relationships are central to enhancing the fostering of dispositions; while this was argued in relation to children aged 3 to 4 years, it is also relevant to the infants and toddlers in this study who were seen to engage in dispositional learning.

Based on the findings, teachers in this study, therefore, promoted a developmental view of learning dispositions. Teachers believed that uninterrupted play, free choice, and a non-interventionist teacher, fostered infants’ and toddlers’ dispositional learning. These beliefs are consistent with RIE and in line with Piaget’s theory of cognitive development. However, they conflict with *Te Whāriki’s* view of learning dispositions as a social construction, shaped and developed through interactions and relational experiences. The influencing nature of RIE was also seen to shape the range of dispositions teachers referred to, as will now be discussed.

*A narrow range of dispositions*

The idea that learning dispositions are individually constructed and emerge during uninterrupted and independent play, supports RIE’s notion of respect for a child’s inborn capacities and natural desire to learn, and RIE’s view of the child as an autonomous self-learner (Gerber, 2005). These ideas promote the notion that dispositions are heavily influenced by developmental processes. While a developmental perspective of dispositions is discussed in the literature (Katz, 1993; Katz & Raths, 1985), it contrasts, nonetheless, with a view of dispositions as learned and fostered over time in the context of relationships and supportive learning environments (Carr, 2001; Katz, 1993; Meade, 2000), as per *Te Whāriki*.

Holding a view of the child as an autonomous self-learner influenced teachers in this study to view a range of learning dispositions that were consistent with RIE. These
dispositions were mainly in the context of children’s autonomous play, observations of peers, and independent activities. The range of dispositions referred to included curiosity, interest, persistence, exploration, investigation, independence, and autonomy (F, p.51). Findings also revealed limited references to dispositions associated with relational learning, such as negotiation and collaboration, as promoted by *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996a). While some of the dispositions that teachers referred to aligned with Carr’s (2001) five key dispositions; for example, curiosity, interest, and persistence, they were still discussed with regard to children’s autonomous play and independence, rather than to participation and relationships to be consistent with *Te Whāriki*.

One such explanation of the narrow range is teachers’ limited understandings of dispositions that lie beyond RIE. This point is significant because the range referred to by teachers in this study did not reflect the broad range possible, as highlighted in the literature (Bertram & Pascal, 2002; Carr, 2001; Carr & Claxton, 2002). While it is conceivable that RIE is a likely influence on teachers’ narrow range, it can also be assumed that these teachers may not have had access to recent and relevant literature related to the many dispositions relevant to young learners. Yet, a stronger issue emerging from the findings relates specifically to the dispositional learning that children bring with them from home, which was potentially not maximised, emphasised, or considered in this setting.

Teachers revealed limited understandings of families as a main influence on infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions. Teachers did not actively seek out families’ perspectives about their child’s approaches to learning, despite teachers employing multiple strategies to communicate with them. Furthermore, care routines, rather than dispositional learning, was suggested as a focus in these conversations (F, p.59). These findings suggest that teachers may have had little understanding of the importance of families to the development of dispositions, despite the literature asserting families as integral to the mediation and shaping of their child’s dispositional learning (Carr, 2002a; Carr et al., 2009; Dweck, 2006; Swick, 2001). Furthermore, and most relevant to this study, literature promotes the importance of families in their infants’ and toddlers’ development of dispositional learning (Carr et al., 2009; Makin, 2006; Popper & Cohn, 1990; Raban, 2001). Therefore, it is possible that teachers’ limited understandings influenced them to steer away from talking about dispositional learning with families.
Such a challenge mirrors the findings of Bull et al. (2008), who highlighted the importance of partnering with families, and learning-focused dialogue, to enhance learning, but clarified that these things were not easy to establish, as they required time and commitment from both parties. Notably, Bull et al. emphasised the need for teachers to reflect on the purpose of their partnerships with families. In my study, the notion of care appeared to be a key purpose for conversations with families. Such a focus is consistent with primary caregiving responsibilities, and reflects Elam’s (2005) claim that care is fundamental to the RIE approach. Therefore, consistent with RIE, teachers’ focus on care coupled with their beliefs about a developmental view of learning, may have influenced them to minimise their reliance on, or consideration for, families’ perspectives of their child’s dispositional learning, a view which sits in tension with *Te Whāriki*’s emphasis on two-ways partnerships with families (MoE, 1996a).

As a result, teachers’ views about each child’s dispositions were narrowly limited to those promoted by RIE, and not validated by the perspectives of families. The importance of seeking families’ perspectives about their child’s dispositional learning is further endorsed by research. Bridge (2001) illustrated that in order to improve curriculum for children in the centre, teachers had to actively initiate discussions with families and include a focus on children’s dispositional learning. This is especially important to my study, as the insights gained from such discussions can enhance teachers’ understandings about the individual learner and his/her disposition-related competence at home. The implication emerging from Bridge’s research, pertinent to this study, is that teachers are actively encouraged to seek out families’ perspectives as a way of developing a more accurate picture of each child’s particular ways of approaching their learning in the home. This approach will broaden teachers’ range of dispositions, to include a consideration for dispositions that are valued by the family culture.

However, building on the challenges teachers in this study might be facing, in general, discussions with families about dispositional learning can be problematic, as they require knowledge about dispositional learning. Nelly was the only teacher in the study who appeared to have engaged in disposition-related discussions with families (F, p.59). Nelly also demonstrated an understanding of how to adapt disposition-related language to make it more accessible to families (F, p.59), which was a likely attempt to make her
conversations feel more natural and less technical. She was also the only teacher to demonstrate an understanding about progress in dispositional learning and the complexity of the disposition construct (F, p.53), revealing a broad level of professional knowledge about dispositional learning. These findings suggest that teachers who are knowledgeable about dispositional learning are more likely to be confident and able to discuss dispositions with families, to the extent of knowing how to adapt the content of those discussions to enhance connections with families. Yet, even with professional knowledge, some teachers might still be challenged to share their understandings with families, as literature reveals dispositions are complex constructs to understand and, thus, to articulate (Bone, 2001; Carr & Claxton, 2002; Crick, 2010; Sadler, 2002).

Still, research reveals that teachers’ understandings and levels of confidence about dispositions can be enhanced by inquiring further into them (Bary et al., 2008; Bashford & Bartlett, 2011). While these research projects focused on dispositional learning in the context of research, their findings reinforce the message that teachers who seek professional learning opportunities around the notion of learning dispositions can enhance their personal understandings and confidence, and their ability to talk about it with families in relation to their child. My study, therefore, suggests that teachers who implement RIE in the New Zealand context might find it beneficial to enhance their professional knowledge of dispositions, so that they can engage fully in discussions with families about each child’s approaches to learning in the home.

**Summary**

Carr’s (2002b) notions of competence and community as the interpretive framework in this section, helped to illuminate RIE as a powerful influence on teachers who, knowingly or not, believed that learning dispositions were individual constructions that were best supported by independent exploration of resources and equipment during play. As teachers’ views about children’s disposition-related competence appear to be underpinned by developmental theory, they are, therefore, inconsistent with Carr’s (2002b) sociocultural notions.

RIE also appeared to have an influencing effect on the range of dispositions teachers referred to when discussing infants’ and toddlers’ dispositions. This range was limited to those promoted by the teaching activities of RIE. As a consequence, teachers were influenced to understate the importance of families’ perspectives, in tension with Te
Whāriki’s notion of partnerships with families, and at odds with Carr’s (2002b) sociocultural notions of competence and community.

In this study, RIE was also seen to have an influence on teachers’ views about assessment of dispositional learning, which will now be discussed in relation to Carr’s (2002b) overlapping notions of continuity and community.

Section two: Continuity and Community: A RIE approach to assessing dispositional learning

Assessment in early childhood education in New Zealand is underpinned by Te Whāriki’s key principles of relationships, family and community, holism, and empowerment. Therefore, it is a broad, relational, and empowering process whereby teachers interact to notice and observe children’s relationships and participation in the centre setting, recognise and interpret significant learning, and respond in ways to support that significant learning (Carr, 2008; Cowie & Bell, 1999; Cowie & Carr, 2009). Assessment also involves teachers connecting with families to help interpret each child’s interests, strengths, abilities, and, notably, learning dispositions.

This section discusses RIE’s influence on teachers’ views related to assessment of learning dispositions (continuity) and the ways in which teachers connected with families to support this assessment (community). It is organised by three main teacher-held views: assessment as observation and documentation, learning stories as a developmental tool of assessment, and learning stories as a one-way tool of communication with families. A summary of main ideas concludes this section, with reference to Carr’s (2002b) notions of continuity and community.

Assessment as observation and documentation

Teachers emphasised observation as a way to gain a better insight into each child. In this study, Rosa and Sarah believed that their observations of children during play helped them to get to know children well and gain insights about each child’s dispositional learning (F, p.53). This finding resonates with RIE’s notion of sensitive observation as a way for adults to tune in to children’s cues, wants, and needs, in order to respond appropriately (Gerber & Johnson, 1998; Money, 2005). RIE also believes that the task of observation falls on the primary caregiver of each child (Elam, 2005). Adults who promote RIE’s notion of uninterrupted play in their practice, therefore, have
opportunities to engage fully in observation from afar. As noted earlier, teachers in this study were guided by RIE’s approach to observation and role as a non-participant observer. However, an issue that emerges from this finding is that observation based on *Te Whāriki* is conducted as part of assessment, whereby teachers watch, listen, and interact with children in order to gather information that will be used to extend learning (MoE, 1996a). Teachers in this study did not appear to reflect this understanding of interacting with children as part of their observations. Thus, a tension is apparent in the focus and purpose of teachers’ observation, between RIE and *Te Whāriki*.

Alongside observation, teachers in this study emphasised learning stories documentation as an important output. Teachers made multiple references to learning stories in their interviews, and learning stories were prevalent in children’s portfolios. Although learning stories are not currently required to be used in assessment, they have become a preferred method for early childhood teachers in New Zealand (ERO, 2007). Alongside this preference, learning stories have been widely supported in research as an effective assessment tool for young children (Carr & Cowie, 2009; Daniels, 2011; Karlsdóttir & Gárðarsdóttí, 2010). Therefore, teachers’ emphasis on learning stories as a main form of documentation concurs with previous research.

Teachers in this study used learning stories to record observations of children from a developmental perspective. Findings suggest that learning stories emphasised children’s developmental milestones (F, p.48) and engagement in independent activities (F. p.47). While these emphases are consistent with Piaget’s focus on development and the individual child, they sit at odds with the way learning stories have been presented in the literature, namely as a sociocultural tool for assessment (Carr, 2001; Cooper, 2009; Hatherly & Sands, 2002).

Carr’s (2001) research on learning stories was a deliberate attempt to move away from documenting a developmental view of learning as “individual and independent of the context” (p. 4), towards a focus on children’s participation and relationships in learning, consistent with *Te Whāriki*. This shift in the way teachers assessed learning aligned with the shifts in theoretical thinking, from developmental to sociocultural, in early education at the time (Hedges & Cullen, 2011). Learning stories, therefore, provided a way for teachers to record their observations and interpretations of learning through a sociocultural lens. In this study, teachers used learning stories to record developmental
notions of learning, which, while consistent with Piaget’s theory and RIE, did not uphold their sociocultural basis.

It is possible that teachers had limited understandings of the sociocultural underpinnings of learning stories. However, the findings are insufficient to explain what those understandings were in more depth. Yet, this possibility would not be surprising considering that writers have claimed learning stories are problematic, as they require high levels of professional knowledge, particularly in the areas of sociocultural theory, reflective practice, and interpretation (Farquhar & Fleer, 2007, McLachlan, Fleer, & Edwards, 2010). More likely as an explanation for teachers’ developmental emphasis, findings suggest that teachers were heavily guided by RIE to inform their learning stories. For example, teachers had access to a range of resources to inform their assessment, including *Te Whāriki* and *Kei tua o te pae*, but they emphasised books by Magda Gerber, Pikler and Pennie Brownlee, who are all advocates and promoters of the RIE philosophy (F, pp.51-52). *Te Whāriki* was revealed as less of an influence than RIE, in this regard.

Teachers’ emphasis on development and independence in learning stories might also be explained by RIE’s focus on documenting children’s growth and development, a responsibility assigned to primary caregivers (Elam, 2005). Findings suggest that teachers in this study supported this responsibility, a task which appears to have stemmed from the work of Magda Gerber’s mentor, Emmi Pikler (Gerber, 2005).

Pikler was a scientist and considered that gathering and documenting data about development would not only assist carers to respond more appropriately to children’s needs, but would also support her research inquiries into the gross motor development of infants (Petrie, 2005). In this study, Hannah explained that her observations of children’s “natural unfolding of their development” (F, p.52) informed her assessment. Hannah’s notion of development appeared to mirror some of Pikler’s ideas about documentation. However, approaching documentation in the ways described by Pikler sits in tension with Carr’s (2001) intention for learning stories to capture complex learning outcomes that align with sociocultural perspectives, such as the notion of dispositional learning in context. It is, therefore, evident that teachers in this study revealed limited understandings of learning stories as a sociocultural tool of assessment,
and, instead, endorsed them as a tool for capturing details about growth and development.

Based on the findings discussed, teachers in this study constructed a narrow conception of assessment as observation and documentation, from a developmental perspective. Observations were conducted as non-participants. Documentation was in the form of learning stories, which were used as tool to record development and independence. While such an approach is consistent with RIE, it sits in tension with Te Whāriki’s view of assessment as a much broader, relational, and interactive process, from a sociocultural perspective. In addition to this, RIE appeared to influence teachers’ summative approach to assessing dispositional learning, which will now be interpreted and discussed.

**A summative approach to responding to dispositional learning**

Assessment as a response to support continuity in dispositional learning requires an understanding of progress. In this study, teachers’ views about progress in dispositional learning varied. In the research literature, such progress is explained by three qualities: breadth, robustness, and richness. Breadth refers to when a child calls on particular dispositions to engage in learning, in various situations (Claxton & Carr, 2004). Teachers in the study referred to breadth implicitly. For example, Hannah suggested a prepared play space enabled children to “show an interest” (F, p.47) while Sarah implied that a changing play space stimulated their disposition to explore (F, p.47). These views suggest a tentative link to children’s ability to call on previously established dispositions as they play, though these understandings were more general than specific.

Progress in dispositional learning is also reflected in dispositions that appear robust. Robustness is evident when a child demonstrates an ability to tolerate more challenge and/or uncertainty in particular situations over time (Claxton & Carr, 2004). Findings in the study suggest that teachers’ understandings about robustness were general, but limited. For example, Milan felt that setting up a nice learning experience would promote a child’s ability “to keep going” (F, p.54) but was not specific in how she might do this. The third quality, richness, refers to the way in which the manifestation of a child’s dispositions appears more flexible and sophisticated over time (Claxton & Carr, 2004). In the study, Nelly was the only teacher to make reference to this quality.
of richness. She provided an in-depth description of a child’s progress from being an observer, to wanting to participate, to actively participating, and then to actively leading (F, p.53). These findings suggest that while teachers had some understanding of progress in dispositional learning, their understandings were limited. An implication to emerge from these findings is that limited understandings of progress in dispositional learning can be a limiting factor on how effectively continuity in dispositional learning is promoted and supported over time.

However, teachers’ emphasis on RIE’s notion of uninterrupted play and the non-intervening teacher appears to be more of a limiting factor on their ability to respond in ways to support dispositional learning. In other words, RIE appeared to influence teachers’ ability to formatively assess dispositional learning. Research on formative assessment highlights it as a process of gathering information about learners and their learning, and using that information to inform teaching and enhance learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Harlen, 2007). Alongside this formative function, assessment can also be summative. Summative assessment involves the gathering of summary information about the learner and their learning, at a particular point in time, in order to report this information to multiple audiences (Harlen, 2007). In this study, RIE seemed to influence teachers to adopt a summative approach to assessing dispositional learning.

A view of assessment as a response to supporting dispositional learning was not a strong aspect of teachers’ articulated practice. Teachers’ emphasis on observation of children’s growth and development, as noted earlier, was consistent with RIE, yet minimised a focus on dispositional learning. However, teachers described children’s play with reference to their dispositional learning, yet these dispositions were mostly unarticulated, revealing the possibility that participating in research might have encouraged teachers to talk about them more so than usual, as was the case with researching teachers in Bary et al. (2008) and Bashford and Bartlett (2011). Further, teachers’ role as non-interventionist observers meant they deliberately minimised their interactions with children during play. Consequently, implementing RIE’s approaches to teaching and learning places an immediate constraint on teachers’ ability to engage in assessment as an interactive process between teacher and child.

Research contends that interactive assessment occurs when teachers interact with children, during which time they notice, recognise, and respond to children’s learning
This approach encourages teachers to view assessment as an indivisible part of teaching and learning. However, the findings of this study suggest that RIE had a significant influence on teachers’ ability to engage in interactive assessment but, at the same time, illuminated teachers’ limited understandings of assessment as a relational and interactive process. These limitations are further exacerbated by teachers’ apparently limited understandings of progress in dispositional learning. These findings clarify the apparent tension between RIE’s approach to teaching and learning, and Te Whāriki’s endorsement of interactions with children as part of effective assessment (MoE, 1996a). It must be acknowledged that a limitation of this study is that it did not include extensive observations of teachers’ practices. Therefore, no conclusions can be gleaned from teachers’ actual practice to support these suggestions.

The implementation of RIE’s notion of uninterrupted play also appeared to restrict teachers’ ability to use learning stories to facilitate planned formative assessment. Planned formative assessment involves the teacher planning and implementing a learning experience for a child or children, with the intention to assess and promote further learning (Cowie & Bell, 1999). The current study found that teachers documented their intentions to support children’s dispositions, many of which referred to providing resources or setting up the play space at a later time (F, p.55). Although the findings of this study do not explain how or when these intentions were subsequently implemented, it is conceivable that formative assessment of dispositional learning was not a focus for teachers.

In particular, RIE encourages teachers to gather information through sensitive observation of children’s cues, wants, and needs, as the basis for creating an interesting environment that promotes discovery play and autonomous exploration (Elam, 2005). Elam suggested that once the environment was set up, adults could continue observing for insights “to support the expansion of the curriculum when the child is ready” (p.89). This approach to teaching highlights RIE’s concern for planning the environment to support development, rather than planning to support progress in dispositional learning through interactive ways, for example, dialogue and interactions. Teachers in this study mirrored RIE’s emphasis on setting up the environment and at the same time, revealed limited understandings of planned formative assessment.
It is evident from these findings that RIE was a constraint on teachers’ ability to support progress in children’s dispositional learning through formative assessment. Tensions are, therefore, apparent between RIE’s emphasis on setting up the environment as a response and the way Te Whāriki’s notion of assessment, which is a process of noticing, recognising and responding to significant learning from a sociocultural perspective, has been interpreted (MoE, 2004). It is concluded that teachers’ assessment of dispositional learning was, therefore, summative in nature. The summative way in which the learning stories were used to involve families is discussed next.

Assessing through one-way partnerships with families

Teachers appeared to hold families in high regard as partners in assessment, but this view was not reflected in assessment documentation. In particular, Rosa felt they had a strong connection between home and centre (F, p.56). Valuing families in this way is consistent with RIE’s emphasis on strong relationships between caregivers and families, set up to support the provision of care that their child receives in the early childhood setting (Elam, 2005). However, the way in which teachers in this study involved families in documentation appeared to reflect a one-way process, mainly from centre to home, with little recognition of families as a main source of information about their child. This issue brings to light recent critique of RIE for its potential to conflict with families’ values in relation to children’s socialisation, interactions, and collaboration during play (Horm, Goble, & Branscomb, 2012). Therefore, teachers in general, who are guided by the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of RIE, might be more mindful of families’ values regarding their child’s learning, and consider how these values align with the learning that is promoted in assessment and documentation.

Findings suggest that teachers gave completed learning story documentation to families to read and comment on (F, p.57), reflecting one-way information sharing. Some families contributed to documentation, but it was unclear how teachers reciprocated these, again revealing one-way sharing of information (F, p.57). While these findings suggest that rhetoric and practice do not always match, it is conceivable families’ perspectives were not actively sought because of RIE’s emphasis on a developmental view of learning, which requires no intervention or learning to be planned for. Another possible explanation concerns the nature of teachers’ time to assess and document.
Teachers’ primary caregiving relationships with children appeared to influence the opportunity for families to contribute to assessment. Due to teachers’ perceived constraints on time to do things in addition to their primary caregiving responsibilities, and the effect teachers’ emotional connections to children had on their level of concentration in the centre, teachers often took their non-contact time at home (F, p.60). This finding builds on Searle’s (2008) research which found that teachers in early childhood education and care had little non-contact time to document assessment.

Teachers in this study were allocated non-contact time, but contextual factors relating to implementation of the RIE philosophy influenced where and how this time was used. Consequently, teachers’ assessment and documentation were carried out without input from other teachers as well as families, highlighting a one-way approach. This individualised approach to assessing dispositional learning appeared to compromise the potential for assessment to be distributed across teachers and families (Cowie & Carr, 2009) and was not in keeping with Te Whāriki’s sociocultural view of learning (MoE, 1996a).

This also suggests that families’ interpretations were understated, and, as a result, teachers’ interpretations or decisions about each child’s learning dispositions were left unchallenged and single-stranded. A singular viewpoint in assessment potentially compromises assessment validity, which is enhanced when interpretations about learning and progress are supported by multiple voices (Carr, 2002b; Harlen, 2007). Validity is also affected when voices like those of families are used only to confirm teachers’ analyses rather than contribute new facets to teachers’ interpretations.

Based on the findings in this study, RIE influenced teachers to take on the role as sole assessors (Hatherly & Richardson, 2007), thereby compromising the validity of their analyses and the subsequent decisions made using those analyses to promote continuity in dispositional learning. Teachers’ commitment to their primary caregiving roles meant they became the main assessors, and, therefore, constructed families as consumers, rather than co-constructors, of assessment information. Therefore, tensions are apparent between the primary caregiving approach teachers adopted, which supports the implementation of RIE, and Te Whāriki’s imperative for two-way partnerships with families, supported by learning-focused communication about their child (MoE, 1996a).
Nevertheless, teachers emphasised the challenging nature of involving families in assessment. Rosa, Hannah, and Sarah commented that it was often hard to get families to contribute because they were unwilling, too busy, or too tired (F, p.61-62). These perceptions about families are significant, as they highlight the challenging task that teachers might face in establishing partnerships with families. This finding is also consistent with research that highlights the problematic nature of forming two-way partnerships with families (Bull et al., 2008; Hujala et al., 2009; OECD, 2006). In particular, Hujala et al. (2009) clarified that the ways in which teachers perceive families can influence the nature of families’ involvement in the centre.

However, despite such challenge, Daniels’ (2011) research highlighted it is possible to elicit the involvement of families in assessing their child’s dispositional learning. Daniels’ research focused on the use of photographic learning stories with 3- to 4-year-old children, and their families, and highlighted the active role of the teacher in sharing understandings of children’s dispositional learning, and what that learning might look like, with their families. In turn, families responded positively by documenting their contributions in their child’s learning stories. My study supports Daniels’ argument that teachers should be actively initiating learning-focussed discussions to engage families in assessment. This assertion is further supported by research that emphasised the importance of learning-focused dialogue with families, as a way of meaningfully supporting children’s dispositional learning in the centre (Bridge, 2001; Bull et al., 2008). As my study has suggested earlier, these discussions with families require teachers to have professional knowledge, particularly about dispositional learning, a point Daniels (2010) did not discuss explicitly.

**Summary**
Carr’s (2002b) notions of continuity and community have been used to interpret this section, and help clarify RIE’s powerful influence on teachers’ assessment of dispositional learning. RIE guided teachers’ focus on growth and development in their observations and documentation. This approach highlighted teachers’ narrow conception of assessment as observation and documentation from a developmental theoretical perspective. RIE also influenced teachers’ summative approach to assessing dispositional learning, by encouraging teachers to downplay their interactions with children during play, and, therefore, minimise opportunities to engage in interactive
formative assessment. Further, a primary caregiving approach influenced teachers to take on assessment as a sole responsibility, resulting in one-way partnerships with families that understated the importance of their perspectives to inform assessment.

As a result, the powerful influence of RIE on teachers’ approaches to assessment sits in tension with Te Whāriki’s view of assessment as a formative and interactive process, as well as with Carr’s (2002b) notions of continuity and community, which endorses a distributed approach to assessment across teachers and families, to enhance learning over time.

**Conclusion**

The major focus of this discussion was to interpret the nature of RIE’s influence on teachers’ understandings of learning dispositions and assessment of dispositions, and the consequences of this on the participation and involvement of families. The aim was to expose the tensions between RIE and Te Whāriki, in regard to views of learning, teaching, and assessment, and to highlight the challenging nature of implementing Te Whāriki’s principle for involving families and communities in assessment, as I argue it is.

Carr’s (2002b) three sociocultural notions of competence, continuity, and community, were utilised to interpret and highlight multiple factors in relation to teachers’ understandings of families’ involvement in assessment of infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions. While teachers’ understandings did not align with Carr’s sociocultural notions of competence, continuity, and community for assessment, interpreting the findings through these notions helped to shape the key argument of this study.

The findings discussed in this chapter clarify that RIE was a powerful influence on views, understandings, and practices, of the teachers in the participating early childhood centre. As a consequence, the weaving of Te Whāriki’s principle of involving families and communities into these teachers’ practices was problematic and challenging.

**Answering the overarching research question**

The original question which underpinned this investigation was: *How do teachers understand the involvement of families in assessment of infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions?*
I based this question on *Te Whāriki*’s imperative for families to be involved in two-way discussions to inform decisions made about their children’s dispositional learning. This was the basis of the argument of this thesis.

The findings suggest that teachers in this study valued families as partners in assessment, though RIE’s pervasive influence on teachers’ views, understandings, and practices, made it difficult for teachers to engage families in learning-focused, two-way partnerships to assess their infants’ and/or toddlers’ dispositional learning. Nelly was the only teacher who consistently demonstrated an understanding of the home and families in children’s dispositional learning. However, the three sub-questions that were addressed in the previous chapter highlight that teachers were aware of the importance of families in their children’s learning though were heavily guided by RIE and its developmental theoretical underpinnings, which sit in tension with *Te Whāriki’s* views of teaching, learning, and assessment from a sociocultural theoretical perspective.

**The next chapter**

In the final chapter of this study, the implications of these findings will be considered in regard to formative assessment practice and teacher education/professional development. Suggestions for future research are made. The chapter concludes by outlining the contribution this study makes to the field.
Chapter six
CONCLUSION

The views and understandings of teachers regarding the ways in which they involve families in their assessment practices have been fundamental to this thesis: “How do teachers understand families’ involvement in assessment of infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions?” was the underpinning question driving this investigation. This question was addressed by exploring, through an interpretive, qualitative case study, the ways in which teachers understand the cultivation and assessment of dispositions, and the involvement of families in these processes, in one early childhood education and care setting. Consistent with the sociocultural theoretical underpinnings of this research, attention was paid to exposing potential contextual influences on these views, understandings, and practices.

This thesis has argued that Te Whāriki’s principle of involving families and communities in assessment is challenging to implement, particularly in practices guided by Gerber’s (1979) RIE philosophy. The effective implementation of this principle requires that two-way partnerships between teachers and families be established, supported by learning-focused communication and consideration for families’ valued perspectives and insights about their children (MoE, 1996a). Effective implementation also requires that teachers hold a view of learning as socially and culturally mediated through relationships and collaboration, and a broad view and wide range of learning dispositions. It also requires teachers to approach teaching in active and interactive ways, and view assessment as an empowering, relationship-based, and formative process to support learning.

Key findings

Carr’s (2002b) notions of competence, continuity, and community have been used to support the conclusion that RIE had a powerful influence over how teachers articulated their understandings and descriptions of practice, how they viewed learning dispositions (competence), how they assessed them (continuity), and how they involved families in these assessment-related practices (community). Significantly, RIE was seen to encourage teachers to embrace a certain view of learning over others, to narrow the range of dispositions to focus on, and to adopt certain approaches to teaching and
assessment that sat at odds with others. By committing to RIE’s norms, views, and ways of working, teachers’ assessment practices appeared to construct families as consumers of information, who sat on the periphery of assessing their children’s learning dispositions. This image of families did not concur with Te Whāriki’s imperative for two-way partnerships with families in assessment. Consequently, some theoretical and philosophical tensions between RIE and Te Whāriki were illuminated.

Tensions were apparent in regard to teachers’ views of infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions. Teachers adopted a developmental view of learning and a non-interventionist approach to teaching, believing that dispositions emerged naturally during uninterrupted play. Therefore, they understated the importance of dialogue and social interactions in fostering dispositions (Carr, 2008; Jordan, 2009) and promoted a view of learning dispositions as an individual construction. Such a view sits at odds with Te Whāriki’s sociocultural view of learning dispositions as a construct that is socially and culturally mediated through relationships and interactions (MoE, 1996a).

Teachers’ commitment to RIE encouraged them to focus only on dispositions that were consistent with RIE’s developmental notion of the child as an autonomous self-learner; for example, independence and exploration. In turn, teachers viewed infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions through a narrow lens, appearing not to realise the importance of broadening their view of dispositions beyond RIE, and considering those relevant to early education (e.g., see Bertram & Pascal, 2002; Carr, 2001; Carr & Claxton, 2002) or those promoted in Te Whāriki (e.g., to collaborate and to reason with others; MoE, 1996a), let alone those potentially valued by children’s families.

Tensions between RIE and Te Whāriki were also evident in regard to teachers’ views about assessing dispositional learning. Implementation of RIE influenced teachers to construct a learning environment with narrow conceptions of assessment. Teachers equated assessment with observation and documentation, with a focus on development and independence, aligning with RIE’s emphasis on observation and documentation of individual children’s growth and development. Furthermore, implementation of RIE, coupled with teachers’ limited knowledge of formative assessment, appeared to restrict their ability to engage in interactive formative assessment. Therefore, teachers were unable to demonstrate an understanding of assessment as an indivisible part of teaching and learning. However, consistent with the ways Te Whāriki has been implemented,
assessment is a much broader and more interactive process of noticing or observing children’s interactions and relationships, recognising the significant learning in those observations, and responding in ways to support that learning, which include discussions with families (Carr, 2008; Cowie & Bell, 1999; Cowie & Carr, 2009).

Furthermore, teachers’ summative use of learning stories, with minimal consideration for promoting dispositional learning, understated the potential of learning stories to be used as a formative tool to inform and enhance learning, with the involvement of families (Daniels, 2011). Teachers revealed limited knowledge in regard to formative assessment as a powerful process to inform and enhance learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Carr, 2001; Cowie, 2009). Teachers’ approach to assessment was therefore, in tension with *Te Whāriki*’s perspective of assessment as a formative process, with multiple participants (Carr, 2001, 2002b; MoE, 1996a).

The theoretical tension between RIE and *Te Whāriki* was further verified in regard to the involvement of families. As a result of RIE’s influence on teachers’ understandings of dispositions as an individual construction, a narrow range of learning dispositions, assessment as observation and documentation, the summative use of learning stories, and of the one-way nature of teachers’ collaborations with families, teachers constructed families as consumers rather than co-constructors of assessment information. As primary caregivers, teachers took on sole responsibility for assessment and documentation, and reflected assessment as a one-way process of sharing information with families. Approaching assessment in this way appeared to limit the opportunities for families to play more significant roles in assessment, as consistent with *Te Whāriki* and Carr (2002b).

Constructing families as consumers of assessment information through one-way processes sits in tension with *Te Whāriki*’s principle of involving families and communities in assessment, which emphasises and promotes reciprocity and participation.

**Implications of the study**

To attempt to reconcile the apparent tensions between the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of RIE and *Te Whāriki*, or other approaches to curriculum, changes to teacher education and teaching practice are needed. Several implications emerged from
my findings. In the following section, recommendations for teacher education and teaching practices are discussed.

**Recommendations for teacher education**

This study has several implications for teacher education. First, based on this study’s assertion that teachers’ implementation of the RIE philosophy has a significant influence on teachers’ understandings, it appears vital that teacher education programmes engender a critical perspective of content related to a range of teaching philosophies and potential influences on practice. While New Zealand has a national curriculum for early childhood education, with its own norms, beliefs, and ways of working, there may be other approaches and perspectives, such as RIE, that also influence early childhood provision in New Zealand. Some of these approaches may be congruent with principles and assumptions underpinning *Te Whāriki*, and others may be at odds, as we have seen in this study in regard to RIE. Therefore, teacher education will need to gain an insight into various perspectives and the assumptions underpinning them, given that they may influence teachers’ views, understandings, and practices.

In particular, teacher education might also emphasise the importance of adopting a critical perspective in relation to curriculum approaches relevant to infants and toddlers, especially as statistics indicate this group is a fast growing area in early childhood education (MoE, 2011a) and concerns about practice with this age group exist, nationally and internationally (ERO, 2009; OECD, 2006). Of crucial importance, this study justifies the need for teacher educators to address the gap in understandings regarding how RIE and its developmental underpinnings, or any other potentially complementary approach, might sit alongside *Te Whāriki* as a sociocultural curriculum, in relation to views of learning, teaching, and assessment.

Second, Carr (2001) and *Te Whāriki* have highlighted assessment as a formative process involving gathering of information about learning and using this information to support progress in learning. Formative assessment has also been emphasised as an important focus in education in New Zealand (Cowie & Bell, 1999) and in early childhood education (Cowie & Carr, 2009). As this study has shown, teachers’ limited understandings of progress in regard to learning dispositions, and the construction of families as consumers of information, reduced their opportunities to partner with
families to support their child’s dispositional-related competence further. Equally important was that teachers revealed limited understandings of how interactions with children are a valid medium through which interactive assessment occurs (Cowie & Bell, 1999). Hence, it is argued that teachers’ narrow conceptions of formative assessment limited their own and families’ ability to support continuity in children’s dispositional learning effectively over time. Formative assessment and Te Whāriki promote an approach based on relationships and partnerships. This is a shift away from teacher as expert who has sole responsibility, towards a distributed approach to assessment sitting across multiple participants, such as teachers, children, and their families. Teacher education/professional development facilitators must therefore seek to address the gap in teachers’ understandings of formative assessment by communicating understandings about assessment as a response to supporting learning and a process distributed across teachers and families, the purposes and nature of effective partnerships with families, and the child and their family as active participants in assessment.

**Recommendations for teaching practice**

A key recommendation for teaching practice emerged from the findings of this study. Literature emphasised the importance of assessment in early childhood being distributed across teachers and families (Carr, 2002b). Literature also emphasised the importance of reflecting on the philosophical basis that underpins teachers’ decision-making regarding teaching and learning (Rodd, 1999). If Te Whāriki’s imperatives for assessment are to be realised, then teachers will need to take a considered and reflective approach to determining any potential consequences of their philosophical approach to practice. This study has endorsed the idea that in centres guided by RIE, it would be worthwhile for teachers to reflect on the theoretical or philosophical alignment, or potential dissonance, between RIE and Te Whāriki to ensure that the broad range of learning dispositions, teaching practices, and assessment processes that lie beyond RIE are not compromised. This will also require teachers to think more broadly about the wider social and cultural informants on children’s approaches to learning.
Limitations of the current study

The findings in this report are subject to at least two limitations. First, this qualitative case study was conducted in a single case setting. While this allowed for the opportunity to gain a rich understanding of a phenomenon, caution must still be applied as the findings are limited in their capacity to be transferable to other settings. However, this study was designed with the view that readers can determine for themselves whether the message of this study is transferable to other settings. The message is that while teachers’ views, understandings, and practices differ, particular attention should be paid to how philosophical approaches align with *Te Whāriki*.

Second, this study obtained most of its data from teacher interviews and centre documentation, methods of which provided access to rich descriptions of teachers’ perspectives and views of their practice. However, it did not utilise extensive observations of teachers’ practice, which might have enhanced this investigation further by clarifying how teachers’ understandings of learning dispositions and assessment with families translate into practice.

Suggestions for research

Finally, suggestions for further research are proposed. This study has attempted to address a gap in literature related to understanding teachers’ work with assessing learning dispositions in relation to infants and toddlers and families. The findings revealed RIE as a powerful influence on teachers’ understandings, with consequences for assessment, which included the learning being assessed, and the involvement of families in assessment. Further inquiry is therefore needed into how RIE and other philosophies relevant to early education, for example, Reggio Emilia, might influence teachers’ understandings of their practice in other settings. It would also be useful to see teachers in other centres where RIE is the predominant philosophy, to ascertain how they may have reconciled some of the tensions with *Te Whāriki*.

In addition, teachers were at the centre of this research despite the fact that the review of literature undertaken for this study highlighted families as integral to the cultivation and assessment of their children’s learning dispositions (e.g., Carr et al., 2009; Makin, 2006; Swick, 2001). Research focused on families’ views would therefore be worthwhile, particularly related to how they cultivate learning dispositions within the
home, the dispositions they value for their children, their understandings of assessment, and of the purposes of collaboration with teachers. Such interpretive research could be supported by analysing observations made of children’s experiences in their homes to clarify the nature of each child’s home setting as an influence on the way they approach their learning in the early childhood setting.

**Significance of the study**

This study has painted a complex picture of early childhood assessment within the context of a centre and teachers committed to the embodiment of the RIE philosophy. It has helped to address the gap in the research literature concerning the assessment of learning dispositions in relation to infant and toddler education and care, and the ways teachers consider the involvement of families in their assessment practices.

Furthermore, this study has illuminated several consequences of these teachers’ strong and impressive commitment to Gerber’s (1979) RIE philosophy in early childhood practice. RIE was seen to influence teachers to emphasise a particular view of learning, range of dispositions, and certain approaches to teaching over others. Along with these consequences, this study verified that implementation of RIE is at odds with *Te Whāriki*’s notion of assessing learning dispositions with families. Of significance here is that while we have a curriculum that promotes multiple theoretical perspectives, how might early childhood communities reconcile these? This question is of considerable importance to teachers wishing to weave diverse approaches to curriculum into their practices. It also highlights the complexity facing teachers who are dealing with competing philosophies. Finally this study shows that implementation of policy, like *Te Whāriki*, is not easy or straightforward.

It must also be acknowledged that implementation of particular philosophies, which are at odds with *Te Whāriki*’s sociocultural theoretical and philosophical stance, can potentially affect teachers’ ability to meet their professional obligations in practice. Teacher educators are therefore encouraged to equip teachers to enter the profession ready to deal with such issues. On top of this preparation, teachers must also be willing to take a critical perspective on the values and beliefs that guide their practice and be open to adapting them so that they sit more harmoniously with the national early childhood curriculum that is *Te Whāriki*. 
Appendices
Appendix A

Centre philosophy statement
Centre Philosophy

The management and teachers of the Early Childhood Centre believe in quality education and care of children. Quality is ensured by the employment of qualified teachers, the provision of a cognitively challenging and emotionally nurturing environment, and ratios sufficient to allow frequent one to one interactions between teacher and child. Management has ratios higher than what is required and is committed to continuing one hundred percent teacher ratios set out by the government.

The centre has an atmosphere that is warm, welcoming, accepting and respectful to children, adults and whanau. Children's growth and development are part of a whole relationship encompassing teachers, peer interaction, family and the community. Open communication between teachers, children, parents and whanau is established and maintained, ensuring the development of responsive reciprocal relationships. High teacher ratios allow for teachers to have daily conversations about their child's day, learning and development.

The infant/toddler area follows the RIE philosophy which is strongly based on providing a culture of respect for infants and toddlers. This respect arises from holding an image of the child as powerful and self-motivated with an innate capacity to develop naturally. We follow primary caregiving with the children because we in the importance of a strong relationship between the child, the teacher and the family. Having that special someone that knows how the child likes to go to sleep, how to comfort them if they are unhappy or certain foods they like, helps the child to feel a sense of belonging in a new environment.

Parents are welcome in the centre at all times. We value and invite their contribution regarding their child's progress. Development of self-esteem, confidence and an interest in learning are developed through a nurturing environment that integrates care and education.

The curriculum emerges from the interests, knowledge and experiences of the children. The programme and activities cater for the needs of all children and allow for holistic development.

Teachers have a basic trust in the child to be an initiator, an explorer and a self-learner. Play is an extremely important part of a child's learning. It is their work.
We are committed to implementing the principles and strands of Te Whaariki, the early childhood curriculum that holds the aspiration 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.'

We recognise the varied individual learning characteristics and strengths of each child. Teachers will endeavour to create a programme and resources that reflect the values and customs of the children's families and are sensitive and responsive to racial, cultural, social and individual differences. Where possible discussion with parents and whanau will decide what is appropriate.

We have a strong emphasis on language and communication. Children are talked to and given time to respond. They are encouraged to communicate and express themselves. Consistent, clear defined limits and expectations, and predictable routines help the development of self-discipline.

Teachers will work in partnership with whanau, Special Education services and any other service needed for children with special needs. All children are provided with protection, opportunities and facilities, which enable them to develop physically, intellectually, emotionally and socially in healthy manner, in conditions of freedom, dignity and respect.

Management and teachers support students in training, those employed in the centre, and students from other training providers during their teaching practicums.
Appendix B

Information sheet - Centre Owner/Manager
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (Owner/Manager)

Dear Owner/Manager of (insert centre name)

**Project name:** Teachers’ understandings of assessment of infants' and toddlers' learning dispositions.

**Researcher:** Maria Cooper

My name is Maria Cooper and I am conducting this research as part of my studies towards a Master of Education at The University of Auckland. I also teach at the Faculty of Education specialising in early childhood education.

This study will investigate how teachers of infants and toddlers in an early childhood setting understand the involvement of family in the assessment of learning dispositions. Learning dispositions are a key learning outcome of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996).

I would like your permission to approach the teachers in your centre, inviting them to participate in this research. You have the right to permit me to approach the teachers in your centre or not. I would like to approach teachers working with infants and toddlers who are qualified or studying towards a qualification, and who are employed on a permanent or long-term basis. I enclose a copy of the Participant Information Sheet for Teachers that I would provide for each staff member. Your permission to approach the teachers places no obligation on them to agree to participate in this study. Further, I seek your assurance that no member of staff will experience any negative consequence to their employment as a result of their decision to participate or not.
I would also like your permission to make copies of some centre documentation. This would include: the centre's policies regarding assessment/planning and family involvement; the centre philosophy statement, three recent samples of assessment/planning meeting minutes for the infant/toddler group; and samples of assessment/planning documentation which highlight family involvement in assessment of infants' and toddlers' learning dispositions.

As some of this documentation would come from children's portfolios/diaries/profile books, I would seek parents' and caregivers' consent to use their child's portfolio/diary/profile book. I would like your permission to ask teachers to assist me with handing out, and collecting from parents and caregivers Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms. I have attached a copy of the Participant Information Sheet for Parents/Caregivers for your information. This consent process would be the only involvement of parents and caregivers in this project.

The research will involve my conducting individual interviews with teachers who have agreed to participate. These individual interviews will take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. At a later date, I will also conduct a focus group discussion with these teachers which will take approximately 1 to 1 ½ hours. These interviews will take place at a time agreed with you and the teachers, and will be audio-taped. Please see the attached Participant Information Sheet for Teachers.

The findings of this research will form the basis of my Masters Thesis and may be used to support future publications or presentations. While the names of the centre, teachers, children and their families will be protected with pseudonyms at all times, due to the small number of early childhood centres with infants and toddlers in Auckland, there is still a slight risk that someone reading the research might be able to identify the centre.

If you agree to my approaching the teachers in the centre, you grant me permission to take copies of centre documentation (where the use of portfolios/diaries/profile books will be subject to the consent of parents/caregivers), and you are satisfied with the information you have been given, please complete the enclosed Consent Form and return to me in the envelope provided as soon as possible. Signed Consent Forms and any data gathered during the research will be kept in secure storage at the Faculty of Education for six years. At the end of this period, all paper data, electronic data and audio recordings will be deleted/destroyed.
If you wish, you are able to receive a summary of the research findings by completing the appropriate section on the enclosed Consent Form.

You have the right to withdraw permission for the use of your centre at any time up to a specified date (to be advised). If you decide to withdraw your centre, all data collected will be destroyed and no report/publication will be produced from this data.

Thank you for taking time to read through this information. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me on 623 8899 x48786, or email m.cooper@auckland.ac.nz.

Yours sincerely

Maria Cooper

Tutor
School of Teaching, Learning and Development
Faculty of Education
University of Auckland
Private Bag 92601
Symonds St
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The contact details of my research supervisors and Head of School are as follows:

**Supervisors:**

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For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, The University of Auckland, Office of the Vice Chancellor, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone 09 373-7599 extn. 83711.

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14 December, 2010 for a period of three years, Reference Number 2010/615.
Appendix C

Consent form - Centre Owner/Manager
CONSENT FORM (Owner/Manager)

THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF 6 YEARS

Project name: Teachers’ understandings of assessment of infants' and toddlers' learning dispositions.

Researcher: Maria Cooper

I have read the Participant Information Sheet, and have understood the nature of the research. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

- I give permission for Maria Cooper to approach the teachers in (name of centre) to participate in her research.

- I give permission for Maria Cooper to approach the teachers for their assistance in handing out, and collecting from parents and caregivers Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms.

- I understand that participation in this project is voluntary.

- I give my assurance that no staff member will suffer any negative consequence in their employment as a result of their decision whether or not to participate.

- I give permission for Maria Cooper to take copies of centre documentation which would include:
  
  - the centre's policies regarding assessment/planning and family involvement;
  
  - the centre philosophy statement
  
  - three recent samples of assessment/planning meeting minutes from the infant/toddler team; and
  
  - some assessment/planning documentation from children's portfolios/diaries/profile books (use of material will be subject to the consent of parents/caregivers).
• I understand that a summary of the findings will be made available to me should I so wish.

• I understand that the data gathered will be used for the basis of this research and may be used to support further analysis, future publications or presentations.

• I understand that all data generated by this project will be stored securely at the Faculty of Education, for a period of six years, after which they will be destroyed as per The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee guidelines.

• I understand that I can withdraw permission for this research to take place in my centre up to (date to be advised).

I would like a copy of the summarised findings

YES/NO (please mark one clearly)

Signed..........................................................................

Name .........................................................................

Date .......................................................................... 

If you would like a copy of the summarised findings, please provide a postal or email address for them to be sent to you:

..................................................................................................

..................................................................................................

..................................................................................................

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14 December, 2010 for a period of three years, Reference Number 2010/615.
Appendix D

Information sheet - Teachers
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (Teacher)

Project name: Teachers’ understandings of assessment of infants' and toddlers' learning dispositions.

Researcher: Maria Cooper

My name is Maria Cooper and I am conducting this research as part of my studies towards a Master of Education at The University of Auckland. I also teach at the Faculty of Education specialising in early childhood education. I would like to invite you to participate in a research project that will inform my Thesis.

This study will investigate teachers' understandings about family involvement in the assessment of infants' and toddlers' learning dispositions. The research questions are:

- What do teachers of infants and toddlers understand by the term 'learning disposition';
- What do teachers of infants and toddlers understand regarding assessment of learning dispositions and;
- What do teachers of infants and toddlers understand in relation to family involvement in assessment of learning dispositions?

I have been given permission by your centre owner/manager to undertake this research in your centre and therefore invite you to take part in this project.

This research will involve you taking part in one individual interview with me, which will take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour, and take place at a time and place convenient to you and the centre owner/manager. It will also involve you taking part in a focus group interview with me and other participants, which will take approximately 1 to 1 ½ hours.
With your permission, your individual interview will be audio-taped by me. After the interview, the recording will be transcribed by me or someone who has signed a confidentiality agreement. You will be provided with a copy of your interview transcript to verify. During the interview, you may choose to have the audio-recorder switched off at any time. You will also have the right to withdraw yourself from the interview or to withdraw anything that you say, up to two weeks after you receive a copy of the transcript (date to be advised).

A follow-up focus group interview will also be audio-recorded and transcribed by me or someone who has signed a confidentiality agreement. Unlike the individual interview, you will not be able to view a copy of the transcript. During the focus group, you will not be able to request that the audio-recorder be switched off; however, you will have the right to withdraw yourself or to refuse to answer any questions at any time. Any information provided during the focus group interview cannot be withdrawn. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, however I ask that you agree to maintain confidentiality with regards to participants' names and the information shared during the focus group interview.

I will also be seeking your assistance to hand out to, and collect from, parents and caregivers Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms regarding the use of their children's portfolios/diaries/profile books (whichever is applicable to your centre). I seek your assurance that parent/caregiver agreement/non-agreement for their child’s data to be used in the study will not have any negative consequence on your relationship with the parent/caregiver or child.

You have the right to choose to participate or not. Your owner/manager has agreed that there will be no negative employment consequence for you as a result of your decision whether or not to participate.

The information gathered during this project will not be made available to your employer directly. The analysis of data will form the basis of my Masters Thesis, and may be used to support further analysis, future publications and presentations. To preserve your anonymity, pseudonyms will replace your name and that of the centre on all data gathered, reported and published from this research.
If you agree to participate in this research project and you are satisfied that all your questions have been answered, please complete the enclosed Consent Form and return it to me in the envelope provided or leave in the box located in the centre office for this purpose, as soon as possible. Signed Consent Forms and any data gathered during the research will be kept in secure storage at the Faculty of Education for six years. At the end of this period, all paper data, electronic data and audio recordings will be deleted/destroyed.

If you wish, you are able to receive a summary of the research findings by completing the appropriate section on the enclosed Consent Form.

Thank you for taking time to read through this information and for considering to participate in my research. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by telephone 09 623 8899 extn.48786, or email m.cooper@auckland.ac.nz. I look forward to contacting you by telephone within a fortnight.

Yours sincerely

Maria Cooper
Tutor

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The contact details of my research supervisors and Head of School are as follows:

**Supervisors:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dr Helen Hedges</th>
<th>Dr Helen Dixon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Dean: Research</td>
<td>Principal Lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School of Teaching, Learning and Development</td>
<td>School of Teaching, Learning and Development</td>
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<td>Faculty of Education</td>
<td>Faculty of Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Auckland</td>
<td>University of Auckland</td>
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<tr>
<td>Private Bag 92601</td>
<td>Private Bag 92601</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symonds Street</td>
<td>Symonds Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auckland</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, The University of Auckland, Office of the Vice Chancellor, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone 09 373-7599 extn.83711.

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14 December, 2010 for a period of three years, Reference Number 2010/615.
Appendix E

Consent form – Teachers
CONSENT FORM (Teacher)

This form will be held for a period of six years

Project name: Teachers’ understandings of assessment of infants' and toddlers' learning dispositions.

Researcher: Maria Cooper

I have read the Participant Information Sheet, and have understood the nature of the research, and why I have been selected. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that:

- My participation in this research is voluntary.
- As confidentiality cannot be completely guaranteed, there is a slight risk that I, or the centre, could be identified by others, however, every effort will be made to preserve the confidentiality of my name, the centre's name and other identifying criteria at all times.
- I am expected to take part in an individual interview lasting between 45 minutes and 1 hour, and a focus group discussion lasting between 1 and 1 ½ hours.
- I will be audio-recorded during both the individual interview and the focus group discussion.
- I have the right to request that the audio-recorder be switched off at any time during the individual interview.
- I have the right to withdraw my contribution shared at the individual interview any time up until two weeks after receiving the transcript to review, edit and approve (date to be advised).
I have the right to withdraw myself from the focus group discussion, or to refuse to answer any questions, however, I will not be able to request that the audio-recorder be switched off.

Any information I provide during the focus group interview cannot be withdrawn.

Signed Consent Forms, transcripts and any other data gathered during the research will be kept in secure storage at the Faculty of Education for six years. At the end of this period, all paper data will be shredded, electronic data will be deleted and audio recordings will be deleted/destroyed.

Data may be used to support further analysis, future publications and presentations.

I agree that:

• I will assist the researcher by handing out and collecting from parents and caregivers Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms.

• I give my assurance that parent/caregiver agreement or non-agreement for their child’s data to be used in the study will not result in any negative consequence in my relationship with them or their child.

• I will not disclose the names of, or any information given by, other members of the focus group.

I agree to participate in this research:

YES/NO (please mark one clearly)

I would like a copy of the summarised findings:

YES/NO (please mark one clearly)

Signed...................................................................

Name....................................................................

Date......................................................................

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14 December, 2010 for a period of three years, Reference Number 2010/615.
Appendix F

Information sheet - Parents/Guardians
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET
(Parent/Caregiver)

Project name: Teachers’ understandings of assessment of infants' and toddlers' learning dispositions.

Researcher: Maria Cooper

My name is Maria Cooper and I am conducting this research as part of my studies towards a Master of Education at The University of Auckland. I also teach at the Faculty of Education specialising in early childhood education.

As part of my continuing study, I am investigating teachers' understandings of assessment of infants' and toddlers' learning dispositions. Learning dispositions describe the way in which children approach learning, for example, at times s/he may be curious, and/or persistent, or at other times, expressive. Dispositions are a key learning outcome of Te Whāriki, the national early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996).

I am interested in promoting teachers’ understandings about the involvement of family in the development of infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions. I would like to use your child’s portfolio/diary/profile book in order to gather data which may contribute to improving teachers' understandings and practices in this area.

I would like to photocopy contents of your child's portfolio/diary/profile book in order to analyse them away from the centre. I am interested only in documentation which highlights your child’s learning dispositions and the involvement of your family. I assure you that I will not be looking at how well your child is learning or progressing. To uphold your child's confidentiality, pseudonyms will replace all names on all data reported and published from this research, and identifying features will not be used in any subsequent presentation and/or publication.
I request your permission to use your child’s portfolio/diary/profile book in the manner described above. Agreement for my use of your child's portfolio/diary/profile book is voluntary. If you choose not to give permission, then your child's portfolio/diary/profile book will not be used in the research. If you agree, you will also have the right to withdraw any information taken from your child's portfolio/diary/profile book up to two weeks after being copied (date to be advised). This consent process is the only role you will have in this research. The teachers have agreed that there will be no negative consequence on the relationship between you, or your child, and the teachers as a result of your decision whether or not your child’s portfolio/diary/profile book can be used in this study.

The data gathered from your child's portfolio/diary/profile book will be used for the basis of this research and may be used to support further analysis, future publications or presentations.

If you are happy to give permission for your child's portfolio/diary/profile book to be used in this research and you are satisfied that all your questions have been answered, please complete the enclosed Consent Form and return it to me in the envelope provided as soon as possible. Signed Consent Forms and any data gathered during the research will be kept in secure storage at the Faculty of Education for six years. At the end of this period, all data will be destroyed.

Thank you for taking time to read through this letter. I am happy to answer any questions you may have. You can contact me on telephone 623 8899 extn.48786, or email m.cooper@auckland.ac.nz.

Yours sincerely

Maria Cooper

Tutor
School of Teaching, Learning and Development
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University of Auckland
Private Bag 92601
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Auckland
The contact details of my research supervisors and Head of School are as follows:

**Supervisors:**

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APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14 December, 2010 for a period of three years, Reference Number 2010/615.
CONSENT FORM (Parent/Caregiver)

This form will be held for a period of six years

Project name: Teachers’ understandings of assessment of infants' and toddlers' learning dispositions.

Researcher: Maria Cooper

I have read the Participant Information Sheet, and have understood the nature of the research, and why my child's portfolio/diary/profile book has been selected. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that:

- Permitting the researcher access to my child’s portfolio/diary/profile book is voluntary.

- My agreement/non-agreement for my child’s portfolio/diary/profile book to be used in this study will have no negative consequence on the relationship between the teachers and myself or my child.

- Copies of the contents of my child's portfolio/diary/profile book will be taken away from the centre for analysis by the researcher.

- All efforts will be made to uphold my child's right to confidentiality and that the names of my child, family, the centre and other identifying criteria will not be disclosed in the data reported and published from this research or in the data used for teaching purposes, in presentations and/or publications.

- This consent process is the only role I will have in this research.

- If I consent, I then have the right to withdraw the data gathered from my child's portfolio/diary/profile book up to two weeks after copies have been taken (date to be advised).
• The data gathered from my child's portfolio/profile book will be used for the basis of this research and may be used to support further analysis, future publications or presentations.

• I understand that signed Consent Forms any other data gathered during the research will be kept in secure storage at the Faculty of Education for six years. At the end of this period, all data will be destroyed.

I give permission for my child's portfolio/diary/profile book to be used in this research:

YES/NO (please mark one clearly)

Child's name ..........................................................................................

Name of parent(s)/caregiver(s) ..............................................................

Date ......................................................................................................

Signed ..............................................................................................

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14 December, 2010 for a period of three years, Reference Number 2010/615.
Appendix H

Individual interview questions
Semi-structured questions for individual interviews

Seek participants’ verbal permission to audio-tape the interview. If they agree, remind them they have the right to ask that the audio-recorder be switched off at any time.

Warm up “I am interested to know why you have chosen to work with infants and toddlers”

### LEARNING DISPOSITIONS

So when you hear the term learning dispositions, what does this mean to you?

- Can you think of any learning dispositions in particular?
- An example of a learning disposition is curiosity, or taking an interest in something. Can you think of anymore?

So why do you think learning dispositions are important in early childhood?

Can you tell me what you know about infants’ and toddlers’ learning dispositions?

- Are there any learning dispositions you would consider particularly relevant to infants and toddlers? Why this/these ones?
- From experience, what might you see if a child has this learning disposition?

**Connection to philosophy:** Do you think the RIE philosophy and learning dispositions are connected in any way? How might this be?

### ASSESSMENT

Based on your experience, can you tell me what you do when you assess learning dispositions?

- What do you think assessment of dispositions involves?
- Some teachers talked about (e.g. noticing, recognising and responding) to children’s learning dispositions, what do you think about that?
Can you tell me of any centre resources of key documents you know of, that can help guide and support your assessment of learning dispositions?

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

In your experience, who should be involved in assessing learning dispositions?

Why is this?

- Is there anybody else?
- Do you think families should be involved? Why?
- Teachers have said that families should be involved. What do you think about that?
- What do you think families understand about learning dispositions?
- Should families know about them? Why?

PORTFOLIO DOCUMENTATION

Ask interviewee to bring out portfolio and state “why don’t we look through the portfolio/documentation together. As we look through it, perhaps you could tell me how this documentation illustrates some of the ideas we have been talking about?”

Thank participant for their time. Remind them that their interview will be transcribed by me or someone who has signed a confidentiality agreement, and they will have an opportunity to verify.
Appendix I

Confidentiality form - Transcriber
Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

**Research project:** Teachers’ understandings of assessment of infants' and toddlers' learning dispositions.

**Researcher:** Maria Cooper

I agree to transcribe the interviews recorded for the above research project and understand that the information contained within may not be disclosed to, or discussed with anyone other than the researcher.

I agree to store any audio tapes (if used) in a secure location whilst they are in my possession and to return them to the researcher upon transcription, or delete digital files once the transcription is completed.

**Name:**

**Date:**

**Signed:**

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14 December, 2010 for a period of three years, Reference Number 2010 /615.
Appendix J

Centre policy – RIE (Resources for Infant Educators)
RIE POLICY: (Infant/Toddler area)

Goal:

The infant/toddler area is based on the RIE philosophy (resources for infant educators, founded by Magda Gerber in 1978). RIE is based on the idea of having a culture of respect for infants and toddlers. This respect arises from holding an image of the child as powerful and self-motivated with an innate capacity to develop naturally.

Procedures:

The RIE method is based on the following principles:

- Basic trust in the child to be an initiator, an explorer, and a self-leaner. Infants and toddlers can learn from each other through parallel play.
- An environment for the child that is physically safe, cognitively challenging and emotionally nurturing.
- Time for uninterrupted play. This will promote concentration and a long attention span.
- Freedom to explore and interact with other infants. Toddlers are capable of working out their own challenges involving other children, with no adult interference, when given the chance. Children learn gentleness from adults who model gentleness.
- Involvement of the child in all care routines/activities (nappy changing, feeding etc), allowing the child to become an active participant rather than a passive recipient. Encourage a child’s involvement by inviting them to become part of the process.
- Sensitive observation of the child in order to understand his/her needs. Observing is the way to ‘tune in’ to a child.
- Consistency, clearly defined limits and expectations, and predictable routines help the development of self-discipline.

RIE is mostly based on RESPECT.

The educator shows respect e.g. by not picking up an infant without telling him/her beforehand, by talking directly to them and not over them and by waiting for the child’s response.

Such respectful attitudes help to develop an authentic child.

RIE models ways of intervening selectively in infant/toddler activities in order to allow children to find their own ways to solve difficulties and to actively and independently explore their environment.

Adults never put an infant in a posture that she/he has not already discovered and experimented by themselves in the course of their autonomous activity and by their own initiative.

RIE is based on the knowledge that attitudes, which are formed in the first three years of life, are powerful, preverbal, deep-seated and very resistant to change. Basic patterns of trust and behaviour are formed in these years based on the relationships that occur.

(Acknowledgement to Magda Gerber)
References


