

The Power of Learning Stories

A meaningful tool in quality Early Learning and Care



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This article highlights the power of learning stories as a method of documentation in early childhood education. It looks at some of Early Childhood Ireland's Learning Story Award winners, who powerfully demonstrate the quality practice that remained their main priority through the pandemic in 2021. Settings were creative, flexible, and determined while continuously offering quality play and learning to children in their care.

In 2021, children and educators continued to live through a pandemic. Educators used learning stories – powerful ways of documenting the reciprocal relationships between children, older people, and the environment (Carr & Lee, 2012) – to document the day-to-day wonderings and explorations of children. They ensured that settings remained playful, with rich opportunities for children during a time when normality had many meanings.

2021 Learning Stories Awards

The purpose of Early Childhood Ireland's National Awards is to celebrate the early childhood education and care sector and its contribution to the lives of children and families across the country. The awards immerse us in some of the most wonderful practices around Ireland every year. We receive learning stories from all types of settings, with numerous styles, attitudes, and curriculums. This article explores some of the winning stories from the 2021 Learning Stories Awards, while appreciating the ever-diligent educators involved. It also showcases emotional connectedness and the power of sharing stories to extend, enhance, and engage children in learning.

Ashvale Crèche

Ashvale Crèche brought us on an exciting learning journey with their story 'The Importance of Staying Connected'. It begins with an ever-present educator who heard the children bring their funds of knowledge on gardening into conversation:

It was obvious that children were interested in gardening at that moment. Senna was 'growing an apple tree from the seed' that he found inside the apple. Carla 'planted sunflowers and mint'. Louie's garden 'is so big that you can't take a picture of it', and his daddy 'is really good at gardening, he grows everything'. The popularity of this topic suggested that there is great learning potential within it.

This natural way of documenting children's journeys, learning, and development links strongly with their words, wonderings, questions, and ideas, and this all begins with listening. Curtis et al. (2013) describe the kind of hearing involved as 'deep listening', when the listener is on the edge of their seat wanting to know what the speaker is saying and to understand the intent behind their words.

In Ashvale, the educator was truly listening, using the children's intended words to direct her role in their learning. She heard their interests and responded with the children by together creating their own garden:

The Starlights class and teachers got to work to get the space ready for seeding. They found shovels and sticks and used them as their tools. The children demonstrated the dispositions of cooperation, participating, persisting and independence.

Sands and Weston (2010) refer to 'wise educators' as those who see children as researchers, who explore the world with dispositions like curiosity and meaningfulness, which stimulates their discoveries. In this story the children continued to explore their many dispositions as they eagerly watched their garden grow and decided to introduce a scarecrow to watch over their crops.

The educator brought them further into this learning by reaching out to the local community, bringing the 'what next' of the vegetables into conversation: the local Lidl showed the children what happens with the potatoes in store. The educator concluded this story by writing a note to the children, bringing the learning and the journey full circle for everyone:

Dear children,

What an amazing bunch of learners you are. Well done for taking on this project, navigating your own learning through it and gaining new knowledge. You truly ARE confident and capable learners. Never lose your passion and huge desire for exploring. Your creativity during pretend play, problem-solving when building a Scarecrow, and imagination during A Story of a Potato made us admire your determination and drive. We hope that this learning experience boosted your sense of identity and belonging. You are a part of a big and friendly community; your parents and teachers will always support you in your learning Aistear.

With Love,

Your Teachers in Ashvale Crèche.

“Sands and Weston (2010) refer to 'wise educators' as those who see children as researchers who explore the world with dispositions like curiosity and meaningfulness.”

Cheeky Cherubs

Cheeky Cherubs shared an entirely different story with us, using different writing styles almost entirely around the wonderful exploration of children's

dispositions. This story began when the children's curiosity got the better of them and they asked: Why is our teacher small?

As the story progresses, we see that Gina, the educator, has a form of dwarfism called achondroplasia. The children's whys and hows leads this story in directions of true inclusion, allowing children to explore the many aspects that arise:

Do you like being small?

Is that why we need to put string on the doors, so that you can open them?

Learning stories (Carr, 2001) are observations of children's participation in everyday activities and settings that demonstrate their growing identities, dispositions, thinking, exploring, and communicating. This story explores many dispositions and includes children in conversations that help them understand and grow in their own identities. Gina concluded:

It was so heart-warming to see you all asking questions and truly wanting to learn more. We explained that the world is not always designed around everyone's needs, and we have to be creative to come up with ways to make sure everyone can use it to the best of their abilities. Children are often underestimated on how much they can handle; they are often shielded from subjects that adults may feel could upset them. However, children are adaptable.

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This truly inclusive practice not only involves children in the conversations but also models a culture where it is okay to talk about barriers or difficulties that some people may meet in life. It models solutions, awareness, and togetherness as the children continue their learning journey:

I am happy that you're small, Gina, because I can hug you.

Sillito (2009) highlights that we must truly hear what children are saying, because to hear goes far beyond the act of just listening.

Maynooth Day Nursery

The final story from our Learning Story Award winners comes from Maynooth Day Nursery. It follows on nicely from the one above, as it emphasises the powerful act of modelling behaviour while entwined positively with the most wonderful learning dispositions. It is clear that this educator too was ever-present and active in their ability to truly know the children in their care:

Having learned so much about you before we met you, you were indeed tiny, as described by your mum, but what struck me was that you were mighty. You know what you are about. You air a confidence, you ponder what we say, you listen attentively, and you soak in the most amazing, interesting facts that interest you.

Aistear defines dispositions as ‘enduring habits of mind and action’ (NCCA, 2009). These are embodied in this story, which begins with the educator telling the child just how she knows her, giving a meaningful introduction that connects so well with the child’s learning dispositions:

When your mum sent me a video clip of you putting your dolls and teddies to sleep, I wasn’t expecting to cry, but I did. I cried because I felt proud, proud of Aisling, Hollie, Emma, Anita, and Niamh and of myself, proud because you modelled what you see every day at sleep time.

You sat between two of your teddies and rocked them to sleep, you checked in on them on each side of you, and you gently whispered, ‘They’re gone...’, just as Aisling does. You then positioned yourself between two other teddies, fixing them and reassuring them that they were ‘okay’, just like Aisling does.

This simple moment of play, which was captured by the child’s mother and kindly shared with the educators, demonstrates not only a pedagogy of care that is truly meaningful to the child but also an appreciation and understanding from the parents which acknowledges that they too were included. They understood that this is part of the curriculum and showed deep learning by the child. They felt the value of this and knew that it needed to be shared with the setting. This play modelled a culture of being that escalated from setting to child to family and back to the child and setting. What an empowering piece from a simple moment of play.

We try to ensure that we are good role models and that when we are designing curriculum, we need to be aware of the hidden curriculum, the one that takes place daily through our actions and our reactions. We believe this to be essential to the wellbeing, learning, and development of you and your friends.

For the child in this story, the educators in Maynooth Day Nursery have recognised that everything they do matters. Children are constantly learning and aware of their environments. They see nurturing, loving interactions and feel connected to these as they use them in their funds of knowledge that entice their play.

These stories, and the many others we receive often in Early Childhood Ireland, show a quality of pedagogy that revolves around a culture of respect, togetherness, presence, and inclusivity at its highest level. In early childhood education we are all on a continuous learning journey, as every day brings us new possibilities of learning.

In 2021, early childhood educators continued to immerse themselves and adjust to the ever-changing expectations in the pandemic. They continued to provide quality care to our children. They carefully documented this learning and play in the most loving and respectful learning stories, as they continue to document children’s learning and to empower them as learners.

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Learning stories, by capturing moments in time, act as an archive of a child's learning and development. Using them to document learning empowers educators to slow down and, in some case, to stop, look, listen, and capture childhoods. It truly is a testament to the sector when we see the quality through our Learning Story Awards shine a light on the practice that thrived in children's play even through the challenges of the pandemic.

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