



Learning Stories: Are these powerfully reflecting the learning culture of your setting?



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Learning Stories are teachers individualised planning for children. Teachers write the narrative (story) followed by an analysis and then think how to grow this learning further (planning). These three parts are what Margaret Carr considers narrative assessment and individualised planning. Their intention is to make a positive difference to nurture learning opportunities for children. This is why Learning Stories, to be effective, must be current (written as close to the context of learning as possible), shared in the team (so that every teacher can support this learning) and written with the three headings visible to make certain that learning is in the front frame. Over time, it seems that in many places, these headings have been absorbed into the body of the story. I know from my conversations with ELP facilitators that we think this is a concerning trend. While teachers might see the noticing (story), the recognising (analysis) and the responding (planning), it is not so obvious for families or children. There is a tendency too for teachers to stay in the descriptive phase, without a clear analysis when the three parts to a Learning Story are combined. This is not 'planning' for an individual child. Learning must be in the front frame, otherwise it is simply an interesting story. The three part format essentially gives teachers an opportunity to discuss the valued learning and support families to see this too. Otherwise we have missed a clear opportunity to support families to be their child's long term advocate. We will have potentially missed the chance too of building a partnership where conversations about the learning interests of the child freely move between setting and home.

Planning for individual children/tracking their progress

There must be equity for each child and this requires a management strategy so teachers ensure no child is missed. However, if teachers are given a list of children to assess, then an essential aspect of narrative theory, 'multiple perspective' is omitted. Children and families then receive limited perspectives, and teachers will often overlook documenting the vibrancy of learning around them because they feel compelled by time constraints to write only for the children on their list. It seems to me that this is more about accountability instead of being everything to do with professional responsibility. It is only when teachers are drawn into an emotional connection that leads to responsive engagements with children's learning, that meaningful, contextual planning happens. Then teachers are able to write with emotional connection, with vibrancy, with effect, with invested energy, to support learning to flourish. When we think of planning like this, it is only natural to want to share this across our team. Reading Learning Stories to each other at team 'planning' meetings invigorates these meetings with purpose and positive energy. The thoughtful analysis that each teacher is supported to write, is the kind of reflection that gets translated into practice when shared. This means we are continuing to build shared understandings of what 'wise practice' looks like and improve not only our writing abilities but our sensitivity to respond in meaningful ways. Everyone grows as a result.

Teachers often make decisions in the moment as happened when a whole lot of cherry tree branches were dropped off to the centre and everyone helped to construct a teepee. No amount of staff room planning could have predicted this opportunity arriving on a door step.

Practical ways to ensure teachers' professional growth

The time we spend thinking and writing about our children's learning is valuable time indeed. Non contact (teacher research time, let's call this time for what it is because we get what we focus on) means one teacher receives some quality time, (supportive employers schedule this time fairly and do not expect teachers to write these at home) to reflect on a child's learning in the context of that learning. That teacher also considers how this learning might be extended. This is planning in action. A draft copy is printed and a team member edits this. It is most profitably an opportunity to have feedback, is evidence



of collegial, professional conversation and so very useful for a range of purposes. These draft copies are kept for Teacher Practising Certificate /Staff Appraisal evidence and internal evaluation folders. Nothing is wasted and instead of, often tedious reflections on practice, away from the context of a child's learning, the annotated Learning Stories are incredibly valuable. This is what we call working 'smarter, not harder'. There is no need to write additional material to make teachers' practice visible when thoughtful Learning Stories are shared and documented in this way. Try this and see the stress evaporate and the wasted time disappear! Management expectations for additional reflective work that sits in a cupboard, for the most part, are often too high. Using the Learning Stories you write every day are much more powerfully situated to change teachers' practice and improve outcomes for children. Teams who work like this have synergy, purpose and shared understanding and it shows in the culture of learning and teaching that happens in their setting.

Group Planning/ Community Stories of Interest

As teachers see links across children's stories, through the interests and dispositions they write about, teachers move individual planning into community planning (planning stories/ stories of interest). When we see all of these areas as a connected whole, we are truly working as a team of teachers and learners inside a community that values everyone's efforts to stretch their abilities; children and teachers. These threads of interest may be about traditional curriculum areas like literacies and they may be about dispositions like leadership and curiosity. Most essentially these track an exemplar of the kind of learning that happens in an ongoing way in that setting. They are a 'slice of the pie' as it were. Margaret Carr has said there are around 900 planning moments each day. It is impossible to record each of these and why would we want to? Using teachers' thoughtful Learning Stories to record learning interests, knowledge, skills and dispositions however, give real insight into the learning community. Compare this with a more traditional planning sheet where teachers ahead of time plan a series of activities. Half of this never happens and the exciting things that do occur, as responsive teachers engage with children, are rarely added to these sheets. This is time wasting for some imagined accountability expectation based in the 19th century! The primary effort is to advance opportunities for children's learning, draw families into teachers' thoughtful reflections and give children a chance to revisit their learning. It tracks the continuity of learning and makes the depth and width of this learning visible. This means we are continually improving learning opportunities for children as many people inside the community of learners know where children's interests lie and can support

these in a wide range of conversations, resources and experiences. This shared understanding takes time to gel and most of all it relies on everyone moving together so that we all keep improving. The progress in teams who work this way is phenomenal. Overtime these teams consolidate this learning, enjoy each other's perspectives and help each other through their feedback. The evidence is most particularly in the vibrancy of the learning culture.