

The use of ‘Learning Stories’ in documenting preschool children’s engagement with a milk provision and education intervention

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Early childhood is an important period for physical development and the initiation of lasting dietary behaviours and preferences. Milk and dairy products are key contributors to children’s intake of calcium and other essential nutrients and it is recommended that 1 to 5 year-old children consume 550 ml of milk or equivalent amounts of dairy products daily⁽¹⁾. The EU School Milk Scheme (SMS) provides subsidised milk to schoolchildren, but in Ireland, currently operates predominantly in primary schools⁽²⁾. The aim of this study is to evaluate preschool children’s engagement with a Pilot of the SMS in Early Years Services (EYS) and to evaluate their knowledge of the origin and health benefits of milk, using Learning Stories.

The two-week SMS pilot was conducted in 20 EYS in Dublin and aimed to promote milk consumption and liking of milk among 2 to 5 year-old children and to increase their knowledge of the origin and health benefits of milk. The intervention included the provision of milk for daily distribution and accompanying educational resources, designed by the National Dairy Council. Learning Stories are a learner-centred form of narrative pedagogical documentation, commonly used within Early Years education⁽³⁾. Early Years Practitioners (EYP) in participating EYS were invited to complete a group-level Learning Story throughout the pilot, documenting children’s engagement with the accompanying resources and their learning around the intervention themes. Practitioners were encouraged to include contributions from participating children, such as anonymous quotes and artwork. Learning stories were analysed using thematic analysis.

Learning stories were submitted by 15 EYS in a range of formats (photographs (n = 3), scrapbooks or posters (n = 7), written accounts (n = 5)). Themes that emerged included perceived change in children’s milk consumption, children’s knowledge of the health benefits and origin of milk, children’s involvement in intervention delivery, intervention acceptability, social influence, children’s engagement with educational activities, and additional learning outcomes. Seven EYS provided evidence of children’s knowledge of the intervention educational topics. Nine services documented children’s development of skills, outside of the aims of the intervention, including fine motor skills and social skills. Children actively participated in educational activities, while interacting with peers and EYP.

Learning Stories provided evidence of preschool children’s knowledge of the origin of milk and its health benefits, and their enjoyment of the educational materials provided as part of the SMS pilot. Due to the lack of baseline data on children’s knowledge, it cannot be concluded that their knowledge was acquired as a direct result of intervention participation. However, the Learning Story format provided an insight into the process of children’s learning within the EYS environment, demonstrating the integration of the SMS with Early Years education. This insight is valuable to the development of future dietary and educational interventions in EYS.

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References

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