Children as experiencers: increasing engagement, participation and inclusion for young children in the museum.

Keywords: Young Children; Museum; Engagement; Participation; Inclusion

**Introduction and context**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN General Assembly 1989) Article 12 acknowledges the right of the child to express their views freely in matters affecting them; but there is limited research on children’s responses to environmental design in museums and art galleries (Piscitelli and Penfold, 2015). This formative evaluation research therefore sought to identify the views of young children and their parents and carers on the World Collection within XXXX Museum and Art Gallery. We argue that engaging children through responding to exhibits produces contemporary culture which provides links between the past and children’s lived experiences. We further contend that museums should view children as experiencers rather than learners and move away from a protectionist discourse which resists informing children of the troubling colonial past of exhibits.

Literature review

Children’s Agency and Voices

Gaining children’s voices is important when conducting research on spaces designed for them, yet they are rarely consulted in the design of museum spaces (Piscitelli and Penfold, 2015). Article 12 of the UNCRC, states that children’s views should be taken seriously in matters that concern their lives (Unicef 2020). The ‘new paradigm’ of childhood (James and Prout, 1997) positioned children as competent social actors capable of taking part in research and as experts in their own lives. This led to an increased focus on gaining children’s authentic voices on issues which concern them and the acknowledgement of the diversity of children’s lived experiences. Child Participatory Research can be a useful way to engage children (Horgan, 2017) but due to time constraints we focused on children’s voices, observations of their interactions in the space and participatory photography of chosen exhibits. We were interested to see how children experienced the space and which objects and experiences were of interest to them. Brookshaw (2016: 6) suggests that museums can include children by ‘asking them what they would like to see or what they think of what is already exhibited’. She further suggests that when children can ‘see themselves’ within museums this increases their interest and understanding. This research therefore drew on emancipatory principles of inclusion which seek to reduce inequalities experienced by young children accessing social, cultural and historic opportunities. We recognize however that children’s voices are mediated and constrained by language, institutional and social contexts and generational power relations between adults and children. (Spyrou, 2011). We also acknowledge that this research is partial but may nevertheless provide useful insight for others.

Museum Collections and Curation

Museums are important cultural community resources for children and adults of all ages as they are (usually) free, accessible, and hold exhibits that pertain to the history and cultural heritage of the local area (Open University, 2014). Piscitelli and Penfold (2015) identify existing models of practice for engaging children in museums but recognize the limited research available from children’s perspectives. Children’s spaces are often designed according to adult agendas (Firinci- Orman, 2013; Yates and Oates, 2019) and within museums, an historical education agenda dominates, as exhibitions are utilized by adults to meet curriculum outcomes (Birch, 2018; Franklin and Sansom, 2018). Theselection, interpretation, and curation of exhibits therefore remain in adult hands and children have little voice on what is presented and how (Brookshaw, 2016). Furthermore, exhibits presented for children’s consumption, represent an adult interpretation of children’s interests, and are often separated from adult spaces, in specific ‘children’s areas’ (Franklin and Sansom, 2018).

We argue this is particularly the case for young children where educational agendas ascribed by teachers and curators dominate (Birch, 2018; Franklin and Sansom, 2018). Museum collections have troubling colonial histories with artefacts acquired through unethical means, presenting an ethical dilemma for both curator and viewer. The selection of artefacts for exhibition therefore demands careful critical reflection on the part of the organization and the curators. Within the World Collection these troubling histories are made transparent and explicitly stated through questions as part of the display, “borrowed, looted or stolen?” (XXXX Museum and Art Gallery, 2020) to encourage critical thinking and reflection. Brookshaw (2016:5) suggests that the cultural heritage selected by institutions and governments to represent “a people, nation, or time” differs from “the cultural heritage of an individual’s identity". This highlights how children’s interests may be lost through these layers of power and the selection and curation processes that occur in public institutions, hence the need to consider children’s responses and interests in these spaces. Brookshaw (2016) posits the need for intangible heritage which, “embodies practices that are transmitted non-materially from the past to the present such as stories, performing arts, crafts, beliefs, and ceremonies” (Brookshaw, 2016:1). We argue that inclusion of children’s intangible heritage is an important way to increase their interest and engagement in museums and make links between the past and their contemporary lived experiences.

Children in Museums

Museums offer children opportunities that may not occur in other spaces due to their distinctive features such as real artefacts and immersive exhibitions. (Crowley and Jacobs, 2011). Furthermore, the range and diversity of artefacts in museums, can support children’s creativity, specifically the development of imagination. (Piscitelli and Weier, 2002; Dockett, Main, and Kelly, 2011). However, it is argued that children should be recognised as experiencers by museum designers and educators rather than as learners (Birch, 2018). Viewing children as learners, inevitably influences the selection and curation of exhibits for consumption where adult led educational agendas dominate. Young children attend museum spaces with others, meaning that dialogue between children, adults and peers is maximised as they explore the environment together (Clarkin-Phillips et al, 2018). It is well documented that children learn through social interaction and relational encounters (Vygotsky 1978; Malaguzzi, 1999; Papatheodorou and Moyles, 2008) and there is much scope for this in museum spaces. However, some museums restrict children’s access and engagement due to the layout of displays and the lack of opportunities for handing and touching objects (Dockett et al, 2011). Children make connections between real objects they discover in museums and their personal experiences; they therefore remember exhibits or experiences when they require participation and encourage imagination. However, where access is restricted, children gain enjoyment through mundane aspects such as looking through railings and climbing stairs (Dockett et al, 2011).

Children explore space using their bodies and display embodied responses in museums such as wandering, running and dancing (Hackett, 2016). However, the layout and physical space of museums can be intimidating; some children may find large open spaces and artefacts daunting and may benefit from a quieter area. (Piscitelli and Weier, 2002). Evidence suggests that children prefer natural and social history museums as they afford opportunities for making connections with their own lives and experiences (Dunn and Wyver, 2019). We argue however, that children can engage with any type of museum if the artefacts are accessible and presented in ways that allow them to engage, respond and make links with their own lives. Bruner (1977) and Donaldson (1978) both acknowledge the capacity of children to understand complex ideas when they are presented in ways that they can relate to and understand. Furthermore, young children show positive engagement in museums when they have freedom of choice, opportunities for collaborative, play based activities (Piscitelli and Weier, 2002); when they have ownership, and can exercise their agency (Brookshaw, 2016; Yates and Oates, 2019)

Inclusive Spaces

Inclusion takes on many forms, an inclusive enabling environment however offers children a stimulating environment that is relevant to all age groups, cultures and communities (Early Education, 2018). Hands on experiences help children to develop an understanding of concepts that are usually difficult for their age (Kaltman, 2010). Furthermore, knowledge of a subject at an early age may produce a lifelong interest in the topic (Kallery, 2011). Despite being public spaces, museums may be viewed as culturally biased due to the unethical colonial background of collections and Eurocentric representations. A recent UK Channel 4 TV programme, ‘The school that tried to end racism’ (Channel 4, 2020) demonstrated a lack of representation of diverse cultural heritage within the National Portrait Gallery in London. This lack of representation may deter some ethnic groups from engaging with museums. In addition, public spaces such as art galleries and museums are not always inclusive of young children or may restrict their voices and movement (Milligan and Brayfield, 2004). It has been argued that children have most agency and value the spaces that they create themselves, but these spaces are “ephemeral in nature and hard to capture or preserve in a museum setting” (Brookshaw, 2016: 3). Yates and Oates (2019) further acknowledge the value of transitory experiences for children and ownership of their own play agendas in public spaces. Opportunities for children to respond to and interact with exhibits therefore supports inclusion and engagement and affords links with diverse lived experiences (Nikonanou et al., 2020).

Methods and Materials

The research was a formative evaluation which aimed to bring about transformative change for young children by consulting with them about their views and experiences of the World Collection. We utilized a ‘shared and democratic approach to transformation involving everyone’ (Armstrong and Moore, 2004:5). This avoids the researcher’s own preoccupations of children’s needs and instead focuses on the aspirations of young children themselves by listening to their voices (Szenasi, 2010). Participatory evaluation focuses on the conscious redistribution of power and the construction of knowledge production and thus avoids the protection of stakeholder’s interests over those with less power which is present in more traditional forms of co-commissioned evaluation. (Squirrell, 2012). Thus, evaluation is produced, designed and undertaken from a multiplicity of socio-political and cultural contexts of all participants. (Squirrell, 2012)

The research was led by two Higher Education (HE) lecturers and 3 final year BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies volunteers, who were invited to participate in all aspects of the research process. A scoping visit was made in February 2020 and further planning visits were made to the museum by the research team before data collection at the Family Day. Each visit was followed by reflection meetings to establish shared meanings and to hone the research process The Family Day was advertised by the museum on facebook, a local child minders site and other social media sites outlining the purpose and methods of the research, and was attended by 137 adults and 156 children The participants were therefore self- selected so cannot be considered to be fully representative of all social groups. Further research was planned to reach a wider demographic but the global pandemic and lockdown has put this on hold for the present.

The research utilized unstructured narrative observations to observe the children’s use of space and their interactions with the exhibits. Observations were undertaken throughout the family day on a rota basis and each researcher completed a 45-minute slot, where they noted down the children’s interests, reactions, movements and expressions. Semi structured interviews were also used, with slightly different questions directed at adults and children as noted in table1. 24 adults and 41 children aged from two and a half to eleven years were interviewed but not all the children responded to all questions. The interviews took place throughout the family day and many of the visitors actively approached the researchers to participate. This meant that there were mixed age groups from one or two families being interviewed at the same time. Kirk and Buckingham (2018) highlight the difficulties of interviewing children and adults independently in museum spaces due to the limited time of visits and attendance in family groups. Furthermore Spyrou (2011:2) highlights ‘the situated character of children’s voices and their limits’ and we recognize how this context may have impacted upon the children’s responses; indeed, in many cases when children contemplated their answers, marked by a period of silence, adults ‘took over’ for them. However, parents and carers are well placed to observe their children’s preferences in such spaces and can provide useful information when children do not articulate their views. The complexities of interviewing young children were further evident when older siblings showed more confidence in expressing their views*.* The researchers took the position of ‘uninformed adults’ (Mayall, 2002) who needed help to make the space better for children and paid particular attention to the language used for the children’s questions (see table 1). Children were further invited to take photographs of their favorite exhibit using an ipad to afford agency and choice and to explain their interests (Spyrou, 2011). Children are competent users of such technology and photographs afford an instant focus for discussion. However, Aiello & Parry (2020:9) warn against the authenticity and objectivity of the photograph due to its ‘status as a trace of institutional and ideological discourse’ they further note that photographs can be ‘staged, faked, decontextualised, recontextualised and mislabelled’. A reflective meeting was held immediately after the family day with all researchers to discuss observations, initial findings, establish shared meanings and to avoid mis- interpretation. The results were collated later by the HE lecturers then discussed with students in a further meeting where frequency coding was applied to identify patterns and key themes. Results from each question were initially collated then frequent key words and phrases were counted to produce codes. The frequency of answers was then collated across all questions relating to the codes (see table 2). The children’s and adult’s data was analysed separately but there was a high similarity in the responses.

Table 1 Questions for children and adults

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Children’s questions* | *Adult’s questions* |
| How old are you? | Do you come to this museum often? |
| Have you been here before? Do you like it here? Why? | Which part do you visit most with your child/ren and why? |
| What can you do when you come here? | Which exhibits do you think your child/ren respond to most? What sort of response do they have? |
| What would you like to do in this room? Why? | Do you think the exhibits here are accessible for children under 5? |
| What is the best thing in this room? Why? | Could they be more accessible or interactive? In what ways could they be improved for children under 5? |
| What would make this room better? | What sorts of activities do your child/ren like to do in museums? |
| Can you think of anything you would like in here that isn’t here now? | Could this space be more family friendly overall? In what ways? |

Ethics

All researchers had relevant safety checks from the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS)in the UK and were required to read and comply with the Museum and Art Gallery’s health and safety and safeguarding procedures. On arrival, all visitors were handed an information letter explaining the nature and purpose of the research within the World Collection space and how the information would be used. Visitors signed consent forms and were advised they may be approached by the researchers to take part.

In the World Collection, two researchers were observing at all times, the observations were anonymous and focused solely on the use of the space and children’s interactions with the exhibits. The remaining researchers approached children and parents to participate. On acceptance, both parents/carers and children consented by signature (whatever the age) and parental/carer consent was also established if children consented to be interviewed and not the parent/carer. Some interviews were audio recorded, while others were recorded using written notes. The researchers were particularly cognizant of the generational positioning of children within research and children’s rights as identified in the EECERA ethical code (Bertram, et al., 2015). We therefore paid close attention to children’s engagement and non- verbal communication to ensure they were happy to take part and were able to leave if they lost interest (this was common with some of the youngest children). Some children were excited and very keen to share their views; some initially engaged but then became less verbal, (in some cases parents took over here). When children showed any signs of discomfort or lack of interest the interviews were immediately terminated, and the researchers focused on asking the parental questions.

Results

Observations of children’s use of space and engagement

The World Collection gallery is a light, open and spacious area, with plenty of opportunities for movement and spaces to sit comfortably. The children used the space fully: running, dancing, sitting down, imitating the figures, lying down and standing still to look closely at the exhibits in the display cabinets. Embodied responses through role play with the masks were common and one child was observed taking on the stance of one of the figurative exhibits in the cabinets (the warrior costume). Further embodied responses were observed in relation to the use of the weapons. One observer noted ‘ a little boy entered this room, he went straight to the spears, he sat down at the base and he was stroking them as if he wanted the spears to come off the pole’ There were a number of large cabinets with drawers that could be opened to reveal glass covered artefacts, one child was observed lying down on the drawer and a number of the youngest children were observed stroking the glass and trying to touch and handle the glass covered objects. Another observer noted ‘One child began to get frustrated at trying to get objects from the display drawer, he began to smack the display box and then left the room, followed by parent.’ The interactive exhibits were clearly the most popular with the younger children for example the block puzzles, magnet sticks, drums, telephone, headphones, books, masks and screens. Older children took time with the blocks making different patterns with the jigsaw pieces, but the younger children used them as objects of play for stacking and building. Post-it notes were used for drawing rather than writing, with even the very youngest children (2 and 3 years) using these resources. Popular exhibits in display cabinets included the weapons, musical instruments and shoes from across the world. The children interacted with the exhibits mainly through touch and movement, for example, touching cabinets, opening drawers where these were available, feeling different exhibits. Popular exhibits that were not in cabinets included the elephant skull, drums, masks and weapons.

Table 2 Frequency of responses across all children’s questions

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Frequency of interest* | *Number of responses*  *2- 6 years* | *Number of responses*  *7-11 years* | *Total Number of responses* |
| Touch things/ open drawers /press buttons | 7 | 10 | 17 |
| Write things/ drawings / post-its /crafts/making things | 14 | 2 | 16 |
| Animals | 7 | 5 | 12 |
| Play drums/instruments | 7 | 5 | 12 |
| Books/library | 5 | 5 | 10 |
| Build towers/ play blocks | 6 | 0 | 6 |
| Telephone/ headphones | 4 | 2 | 6 |
| Weapons | 4 | 2 | 6 |
| Look at things | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| Playground equipment/football | 3 | 2 | 5 |

Children’s responses from interviews age 2-6

The child participants attended with family and friends, so the interviews became group interactions, but researchers kept careful notes of the child participants ages and responses. Some younger children initially engaged then lost interest as noted by one of the researchers, ‘Two girls aged 2 and 3 were both keen to write their name on my paper then went off to explore”. Others were excited to share their views and had come for this purpose. In some cases, parents responded for their children and children nodded and smiled to demonstrate agreement, in other cases children pointed or gestured at exhibits. These responses were recorded as valid. All children said they enjoyed being at the museum, two 4 years olds suggested “Cause it’s so much fun” and “Cause you get to see everything”. The youngest children did not verbalise touch or interaction as frequently as the older children, but it was clear from the observations (see above) that this was desirable as they engaged with the exhibits and space in a physical way, stroking exhibits, glass cases and handing anything that was available to touch. The highest overall response from the youngest children focused on writing, drawing and making things (see Table 2). One excited response was “Colouring, drawing! Maybe doing a painting” (age 6) another mentioned “crafts, making things” (age 6). One girl aged 6 said that the post it notes were best because ‘you get to write what you like’. The blocks were popular with the youngest children mainly for building with one stating ‘Hey I built a big tower look’ (age 5) another 6-year-old stated, “I like to build things with big models”. Another 2-year-old said she liked to make “towers” but left the activity to draw intricate pictures on the interview consent form with the interviewer’s purple pen. The instruments and books were popular across all ages; the drum drew a constant small crowd as it was one of the few interactive resources available. The instruments were also the second highest photographed exhibit after the weapons (5 & 6 respectively). Interestingly, animals and the fox were mentioned by 12 children overall despite their location in another room. A girl of 4 liked “A big giant beetle” and another noted ‘I like the stuffed animals, you can see how scary they are, you can touch’ (age 6). A 2-year-old using the screen paused to view an image of a dog and a stuffed animal toy, scrutinising their contents, but swiped swiftly over other images. The children’s recommendations in this age group focused on more things to do, one response suggested “being able to touch and buttons to press” (age 6). Three children (under 5) mentioned playground equipment including a slide, a roundabout, and bouncy castle. Another child suggested “Making and lego, reading more books and football” (age 5).

Children’s responses from interviews age 7-11

Older children were able to verbalise their views in more detail for example, one 8-year-old noted, “You can play with the drums and look around, there are interesting things here” and a 10 year old explained “I like all the historical stuff here, I like it when you can touch old instruments”. Another 10-year-old noted, “It’s got lots of cool stuff and creepy old stuff**”.** The highest response from older children focused on touch and interaction (see table 2). There was a similar interest in the books, animals and instruments (see table 2) as for younger children. Responses for improvements included, ‘some more things to touch’ (age 10) and interactive opportunities. One child suggested “an actual pyramid” (age 8), Two mentioned dressing up “like a pharaoh” and one suggested “It would be good to try things on without the wires” (age 8).

Adult responses from interviews

Table 3 Frequency of adult responses related to children’s engagement

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Frequency of responses* | *Number of responses* |
| Interactive activities | 38 |
| Arts /crafts/making things | 20 |
| Animals /nature gallery | 11 |
| Blocks/building | 8 |
| Special exhibitions (lego/dinosaurs) | 7 |
| Dressing up | 3 |
| Mummies/ Egyptian section | 3 |
| Puppets | 2 |
| Trails | 2 |

The highest number of responses mentioned interactive opportunities; comments included, “Anything they can interact with and get involved, they do like the animals” and another noted “Interactive elements, the recording equipment, the new masks on sticks but some are broken…they enjoy the mummies”. Arts, crafts and making were the next highest category, one comment was “They both like doing activities…more crafts”*.* The animals were the next highest response with one response highlighting the sensory opportunities, *“*The animals, there’s lots to look at, touching and it’s free”. Another parent mentioned the value of sensory opportunities and play “The blocks are definitely the favourite, just being able to open the drawers - she likes treasure boxes, so she loves opening things and discovering”.

The responses for recommendations concurred with those of the children with the highest numbers focusing on interactive and sensory opportunities. One participant said, ‘They like touching things and pressing buttons and asking questions’, another stated “More interactive activities, drawing materials and a wall where they can put up their art” and a third suggested “More hands- on experiences so the children can have fun”*.* Interestingly, more adults mentioned dressing up (6) than the children (3). Other areas mentioned were more movement and better signage and information. Further comments focused on access, layout and information. One response suggested, “The information is not effective or child friendly” and another stated, “The children are looking for something to do, interaction, there is not enough time to read for adults, too much reading, too many words”. Only one adult mentioned a designated area for children, and another mentioned the need for more toilets.

Discussion

Handling /Sensory opportunities

The majority of children who took part in the research were in the 2-6 age group (19 responses) but there were responses from older children too (7-10 age group, 9 responses). The responses revealed there were limited opportunities for handling exhibits, and it was clear from the findings that this was desirable. It is well documented that young children explore through their senses and through handling objects (Piaget 1964; Vygotsky 1978; Goldschmeid, et al., 2004; Malaguzzi 1999, Crowley 2014). Children were observed touching the exhibits, trying to remove objects from the drawers, stroking the glass cases and pressing their faces on the glass cabinets. The animals were very popular in the children and adults’ responses (Tables 2 & 3) despite their location in another gallery. Some of the animal exhibits can be touched, unlike most of the exhibits in the World Gallery. Dunn and Wyver (2019) suggest that children make clearer connections with natural history exhibits and their own lives and our evidence appears to support this; however, we argue that children have the capacity to make connections when they have opportunities to respond to exhibits and when they are asked the right questions.

The resources provided specifically for children in the ‘children’s area’ (masks, drums, magnets, blocks recording desk, screens, post-its, books and telephone) were very well used, but some were unrelated to the exhibits on show and their purpose was unclear to the youngest children. For example, the magnets rods, (see Fig 1) designed as emotional response markers, were used as objects of play to make towers, or to attract and repel each other. Similarly, the block jigsaws, were used for building towers and other structures. The youngest children were most engaged by the resources they could touch and interact with such as the drums, telephone, magnets, block jigsaws and screens. These resources kept them entertained but did not encourage engagement with the other exhibits on show. The elephant skull (see Fig 2) was also popular with many of the children as it was well positioned and accessible; however it had a ‘no touch’ image which did not deter the children from stroking it. More opportunities to handle objects related to the exhibitions may be a better way to increase their engagement.

The weapons were the highest photographed exhibit (6) and it was clear from the observations that these held children’s interest. Weapons and ‘play fighting’ are very popular with young children despite the moralistic judgements of adults and educators. Holland (2003) suggests that ‘play fighting’ provides important opportunities for children to grapple with difficult moral concepts and conflict resolution supported by sensitive adults. The weapons section could therefore be developed using carefully worded questions to encourage such reflection and could possibly link with the Soldier collection in the adjacent gallery. While the world gallery affords many interesting artefacts there is a clear lack of opportunities for sensory experience and handling of artefacts to engage children.

Image 1: Magnet sticks

Image 2: Elephant skull

Making /interactive Opportunities

Brookshaw (2016) suggests that artefacts alone may not engage audiences, but the inclusion of intangible heritage such as stories, songs, rhymes and ‘playlore’ that link with specific exhibits can bring them to life. The responses from both children and adults emphasized the desire for more interactive exhibits and more opportunities for “touching things and pressing buttons”. Interactive activities were the most frequently mentioned category and had the highest number of recommendations from adults and children (tables 2 and 3), particularly the older age range. Opportunities for children to press buttons to see images, films, hear songs or examples of children’s stories linked to exhibits may be one way to engage them and to make links with their own stories and lived experiences.

Making, doing, and crafts were the second highest category mentioned by children and adult responses, and the highest response from the youngest children. This is not surprising and supports previous research which recognizes the need for children’s agency and ownership of their play (Yates and Oates, 2019). This is further supported by Piscitelli and Penfold (2015: 266) who suggest that an experiential model can provide opportunities for children’s creativity by utilizing ‘children’s play as the catalyst for inquiry’. However, during dissemination of the research, museum staff raised concerns about the sensitive nature of the exhibits and their cultural past and seemed resistant to share this information with young children revealing a protectionist discourse of childhood (for example, the Chinese bound feet shoes and the weapons). We argue however, that children can understand and discuss complex information including moral ethical dilemmas and histories when asked the right questions.

There were many recommendations from the children including building models, drawing, writing, and dressing up. The post-it notes were well used, but most younger children used these for drawing on rather than writing their responses. This demonstrates the need to increase the amount and range of drawing materials and places for children to draw. The children also mentioned making /doing activities, echoed by the adult responses, which could involve making their own versions of exhibits or their own responses to specific artefacts for display alongside the original exhibition, affording opportunities for asking questions and discussion with peers and adults. The adult responses suggested the value of display space for children to display their responses, which concurs with the work of Yates and Oates (2019). Temporary exhibitions of children’s intangible heritage as discussed by Brookshaw (2016) may provide useful opportunities for deeper reflection, dialogue, and to acknowledge what children value. Providing opportunities for individuals to contribute content and explore their own ideas supports inclusion (Nikonanou et al (2020). The World Gallery does have examples of artefacts from the local community, but this could be expanded more specifically for children to increase their interest.

Space, layout and display

The children enjoyed the space and freedom of movement afforded by the layout illustrated in their embodied responses and use of the space, but this could be expanded. Markers, pathways, images, projections or text on the floor directing children to specific exhibits or areas of interest may be useful here. The ‘designated children’s space’ included much of the interactive equipment such as the telephone, headphones, book area and screen. The area was a calm space, with comfortable chairs and was popular with the younger children, due to the sensory, interactive opportunities and resources provided supporting the ideas of Piscitelli et al (2003). However, this space could also be interpreted as a ‘holding space’ to keep children occupied away from the main exhibitions (Franklin and Sansom, 2018). It has been suggested that museums attempt tocreate ‘socially competent children’ with expected knowledge and behavior embedded within ‘museum culture’ (Milligan and Brayfield 2004:277). This is in tension with an inclusive approach which assumes children’s competence, encourages children’s participation, and respects children’s responses.

The adult responses focused more on practical aspects such as signage, information boards and access. Some commented on the lack of signage and the amount of text to read, which was not age appropriate or inclusive for young children; limiting the text or providing recorded information might be a way to improve this. Another adult suggested “more movement” and one suggested ‘little steps’ for children to move around to improve access to the exhibition cases. Interestingly only 1 adult suggested a ‘designated children’s space’

Embodied responses and opportunities

The observations demonstrated children’s embodied responses and the open space was utilized very well by the children. The bright, open layout of the World Gallery allows good access and for pushchair and wheelchair users and affords children opportunities to move freely and easily between the cases and to touch some of the exhibits. Franklin and Samson (2018) note the importance of embodied responses and recognize children’s capacity for expression through their bodies.

Although the space and layout were good overall, there were limited opportunities for embodied play in the World Gallery, apart from the few resources available to handle as discussed. Role play and dressing up was mentioned by both children and adults in the interviews and can provide opportunities to make links with the exhibits and enact experiences through play (Krakowsi, 2012). This was observed in the children’s play with the masks, the telephone and their enactment of some of the figurative exhibits, such as the warrior. Offering ‘dressing up’ opportunities and contemporary resources linked to the exhibits (shoes, hats, jewelry) may be a way to encourage a deeper engagement with children’s lived experiences.

It was clear that children engaged with the space on a physical level and there may be benefits to offering more opportunities for this. This could include temporary structures which link to the exhibits or larger scale equipment for climbing and building (possibly outside) providing opportunities for children to expend energy and follow their own play agendas. This may also attract more visitors to the museum for a longer period of time.

Conclusion

Piscitelli and Penfold (2015:266) suggest that children’s engagement and discovery is enhanced in exhibitions that provide opportunities for children to ‘connect with their own artistry and creativity’. There was some scope for children’s creativity in the museum, but there were limited sensory or interactive opportunities and children’s participation and engagement could be improved. Although the space was light, open and accessible, it appeared designed for adults, and was not fully inclusive. The ‘designated children’s area’ appeared an afterthought with ‘add on’ experiences provided. Furthermore, the information text was designed for adults and only in English, also many of the exhibits were inaccessible for young children due to their placing; as a result, the children followed their own play agendas with the resources provided.

Children have the right to be fully included in public spaces, and an effective way to do this is to encourage their participation and respect their responses (Nikonanou, et al.2020). This can be achieved through the curation of the space with a focus on accessibility and inclusion. The careful placing of artefacts, opportunities for handing, and the accessibility of information for all would benefit the space. In addition, opportunities for children to create culture in response to exhibits on their own terms may increase their engagement and interest. This can be achieved through drawing, making, playing, dancing, singing, dressing up, touching and handling objects and through expressing their views. It is evident that children follow their own interests and form their own agendas in public spaces, rather than the agendas of adults (Blundell, 2016). Museums, therefore should reject a protectionist vulnerability discourse of childhood and embrace a discourse of competence and empowerment by recognizing children’s ability to understand difficult concepts and respond. Museums should therefore encourage children’s responses, participation and creativity and embrace children’s intangible, transitory culture rather than imposing an adult agenda of learning and didacticism.

This research was completed just before the national lockdown and due to the global pandemic, all of the interactive resources have since been removed from the space. The results were shared with the museum in March 2021, and there are plans to implement some of the recommendations when funding and time constraints allow. We hope to return to re-evaluate after changes have been completed.

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