

Editorial

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Strangers Hall, a fourteenth century merchant's house in Norwich, displays an unusual portrait. The painter is anonymous. The portrait dates from about 1670 and shows a bright, healthy-looking child alone in a room with dark brocaded fabrics behind. The child is enclosed within a wooden contraption that functions like a contemporary baby-walker, but the manner of construction – spiral carved struts, metal clasps – makes it look somehow cruel or restrictive. In one hand the child holds a twisted stick of crimson with a golden handle and a loose sash securing it around the tummy. This object is only comprehensible with the help of the painting's title – 'Boy With Coral' – and the text on the wall which explains that during the Stuart era, tropical coral was a teething aid for children in some rich families.

The boy in 'Boy With Coral' is a symbol for the child in our public museums. The boy's gaze is steady, confidently engaging the viewer. His stance is confident too, standing

upright, taking no support from the structure that surrounds him. Yet there is something incomprehensible to us about his position: though his feet are hidden by his long gown, the painting's composition suggests that they are not quite in contact with the floor. To complete this symbol of the ambiguity of a child's place within the museum, the foremost wheel of the baby-walker has snapped, and just in front, a small spaniel, somehow out of scale with the child, is arching its head upwards and barking.

This painting is thought to be the earliest pictorial representation in Britain of specialised equipment intended for, and being used by, a child. 'Boy With Coral' also coincides with the birth of public museums. Amerbach Cabinet in Basel, one of the first, opened in 1671. From then on museums began to serve a civic function, as a place to encounter marvellous objects together, and support the growth and sharing of knowledge.

Over the years, the civic and social role of museums has developed in response to changing contexts and community needs. Gradually, children have come to be seen as a museum audience in their own right, with the unique perspective of the very youngest children only being considered relatively recently.

Despite continued growth in Early Years provision in museums over recent years, the area is still often not well theorized, often misunderstood and frequently invisible to those not directly connected to young children. Our own work as museum educators has highlighted the need for more accessible, high quality and critical accounts drawn from first-hand experience with young children in museums.

As reflective practitioners we ask questions to understand and respond better to our audiences. What does a visit to a museum feel like for a young child? How do we find out, when speech is only one of the means by which young children communicate? How do we support these rich visits for young children? How do we scaffold children's learning without restricting them, like the seventeenth century baby-walker would have done? How do we work with young children's modes of exploration when, like the feet under the boy's gown, they are not always visible to us.

This special issue brings together accounts from practitioners across the UK and beyond who describe their experience of working with young children, relating this to the theoretical frameworks and research evidence that inform and shape their practice. We hope both to inspire and to inform readers wanting to learn more about young children's learning in museums and galleries, as well as those seeking to understand more about evidence-rich practice in cultural learning.

User value and the changing role of museums

As museums evolve, so too must our idea of what knowledge is and how we situate expertise within our cultural institutions. In their review of the user value of museums and galleries, Scott, Dodd and Sandell (2014) describe the need to better understand first-hand, individual experience as funders and policy makers increasingly position museums as agents of social change. Museum educators are ideally placed to move this debate forward, to build on our knowledge and experience of working within our local communities and to develop our own practitioner-led research and work in collaboration with academics across other disciplines.

What does practitioner-led research look like?

Emily Pringle (2020) defines the characteristics of the practitioner researcher as follows:

- Motivated by curiosity and ongoing questioning.
- Committed to developing their knowledge of practice (know how) and understanding of theory (know what).
- Elicits and engages in reflection and the assessment of changes brought about by their work.
- Engages in collaboration and active knowledge exchange with practitioners and others e.g. artists, academics, community members, museum visitors.
- Disseminates their knowledge and makes their learning visible to others in ways that are useful.
- Works with integrity, bravery, generosity and care.

The contributors to this special issue share many of these characteristics and employ their considerable practical knowledge and expertise to move beyond anecdotal accounts of 'what we did' to a more reflective and critical perspective, examining 'what worked' (and didn't) based on 'what we know'. These approaches enable us to

develop a more nuanced understanding of what museums and cultural spaces can offer young children.

The lines of enquiry which developed from our own work with young children (Wallis and Noble, 2017) have a synergy with the themes explored by the authors in this special issue. We use these lines of enquiry to point out some of the links between the different contributions.

Multimodality and different ways of making meaning

Museums are places where human bodies, materials, ideas, and emotions may interact and entangle with one another in myriad ways. Observing and being present with young children in gallery environments brings this multimodality to the fore as we notice the ways in which they use their bodies and the possibilities of the space around them to build new understandings and communicate these to others.

In this volume, Menzies describes how physical gesture and movement can be used to develop an understanding of scientific concepts. Meanwhile, the contributions by McCall & Boycott-Garnett and by Fellows highlight ways in which children's presence in a gallery has an effect on the space, while their bodies, actions and emotions are simultaneously being shaped by the environment.

The multisensory, multidisciplinary world of the museum can support and enable young children's multimodal learning and communication. A sensitivity to, and an understanding of, how this can work seems vital in developing high quality experiences for our young visitors.

Strangeness and familiarity

The articles that follow provide examples of what might constitute high quality museum practice for children in their early years. However, all make the case that context is

key. There is no simple recipe or checklist that practitioners can use to ensure that their work is successful. Rather, an understanding of the particular context of an individual child, a family, a location, a social situation, or a political issue, in combination with an in-depth awareness of pedagogical possibilities, is what helps us to develop responsive practice. Sensitive, research-informed approaches enable us to create cultural experiences that have meaning for, and are of value to, the children, families and communities that we serve.

Museums offer to show us something new: to open out a fresh perspective, to take us into the unknown. This can be exciting, but also intimidating or uncomfortable. The following articles explore ways in which museums might bridge the familiar contexts of children's everyday experiences, and the new and strange worlds of the museum. Graham & Pounder, for example, describe how they worked from a variety of different starting points according to local contexts, to frame this strangeness positively and ultimately give a sense of ownership and confidence in a new environment.

Supporting practitioners

None of the projects described here happened in isolation: all involve working together with colleagues from other sectors, whether those are academic researchers (Menzies), Children's Services and local government (Fellows and McCall & Boycott-Garnett), or Early Years settings (Graham & Pounder). Readers may wish to reflect on the relationships described here – is the role of museums to support practitioners from other fields by demonstrating alternative approaches to supplement those with which they are already familiar? Or is it to work collaboratively alongside those practitioners, adapting our own work as we learn more from them? The articles here also suggest interesting ways of sustaining such relationships beyond the parameters of individual

projects, which may well be of interest to readers developing partnerships as part of their work with young children.

Making the invisible, visible

When putting out the call for papers for this journal, we were already aware of a huge variety of innovative and exciting programmes and opportunities for young children in museums. We were also aware that much of this was not seen or recognised outside the field, or even outside individual organisations.

Working as a practitioner-researcher means first, making clear links between the theory, practice and analysis of our work; and second, using opportunities, such as this journal, to disseminate our findings. This has three important outcomes.

- Quality assurance – the practitioner-researchers featured here describe how they scrutinise their work to ensure that it is working positively for the children, families, and professionals involved. This may then form a guide for others – not simply to lift and transfer – but an example of what a successful and productive programme looks like will, we hope, provide inspiration.
- Development – a great strength of practitioner research is that new learning can quickly be integrated into the next cycle of professional action. The iterative process of delivering, reflecting, and planning is particularly prominent in the article by McCall & Boycott-Garnett. Making these cycles of change visible is another source of encouragement to practitioners who feel in need of direction.
- Increased profile – these studies show that children’s contributions to our museums and galleries are valuable and worthy of careful enquiry. We have a role as mediators for young children and amplifiers of the meanings they create. By clearly identifying our work as research,

we raise children’s status and increase the visibility of their role in cultural life: we hope that as you read these articles the voices of the children involved will ring through!

The power of objects and how to share it out

The objects in museums have power. They call to us (McCall & Boycott-Garnett), they make our bodies move in particular ways (Menzie), they inspire our curiosity (Graham & Pounder) and connect us with others (Fellows). How might we harness this power and put it in the hands of children and communities? Given the growing inequalities that we see at both local and global scales, this is urgent.

The articles in this issue mention the importance of generating capital: social capital, science capital, cultural capital. Continuing the financial metaphor, perhaps it is possible to see how our assets – museum objects, into within which value has been invested by their makers, owners, users, curators, and visitors – might continue to pay an imaginative and cultural dividend, but one that is shared more equitably through thoughtful, generous, and socially-just practice like the examples given here?

And our young visitors bring capital of their own. None of the contributors to this journal presents a deficit model of children or families; all describe with delight the positive contributions that young children can bring. We hope that through these articles, readers will share that sense of connection and seek it out in their own work with renewed joy and determination.

Final thoughts

‘Boy With Coral’ stares out confidently from his portrait, but his gaze misses the immediate danger. The unreliable baby-walker with its broken wheel will pitch him forward onto the angry little dog. He is shown to be both proud and vulnerable. Young children are

vulnerable, but with caring adult support they are also resourceful, resilient, creative and quick to learn. As their world widens, they need a social space in which to make meaning, to understand and own what they have encountered. The rich but ordered resources of a museum, can offer manageable ways for young children to encounter the new and then incorporate it into their understanding. As the numbers of UK children living in poverty continue to grow (Hood and Waters 2017), the challenges of maintaining an accessible, vibrant and relevant museum culture will increase. This special issue shares ways that museums practitioners are ideally placed to address these challenges. As practitioner researchers we can simultaneously develop new knowledge and make change. We hope that this special issue will inspire readers to acknowledge your own unique positionality, and consider how what you know about working with young children in museums might add to this emerging evidence base.

References

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