Learning at museums: Excursions and outreach programs for early childhood education

Background
Museums can be wondrous places for young children and their families to visit, providing opportunities to see and interact with artefacts that are not part of their everyday lives. Museums are places where children can encounter novel objects in a space that supports multisensory learning, providing encounters with historical, cultural and environmental knowledges. Many children visit museums with families, but for some children an excursion with their early learning centre may be the first time they have been able to see (and touch) museum exhibits in real life.

Early childhood programs can organise to visit museums (excursion), and some museums offer outreach programs (visits to early childhood settings) to provide access to museum objects and resources. Importantly, these museum education programs are led by presenters who have expertise in the collections and exhibits; early childhood educators bring their expertise in pedagogy and children’s individual interests to bring the learning to life.

The Study
Our research was designed to investigate the elements of museum education programs that support young children’s engagement and learning. We studied two museum early childhood education programs: an on-site program at the museum that explored concepts of Indigenous culture, place and environment, and an outreach program on dinosaurs and fossilisation.

We observed the visits, using qualitative data to capture multiliteracies and the interactions between museum presenters and children. The data included interviews with five museum presenters and 14 early childhood educators who worked with the groups of four-year-old children (296 children in total), half of whom visited the museum, with the other half enjoying the outreach program where museum staff brought artefacts and stories to the early learning centre.

Key findings
Three key findings from our study highlight the importance of artefacts at museums and the interactions with, and about, these artefacts.

1. All early childhood educators in our study spoke about the value of children encountering objects and materials they wouldn’t otherwise see. For example, children were fascinated by the Indigenous possum skin pelt at the museum and continued to talk about it after the excursion.

2. Not only did museum presenters introduce children to new objects, but embodied learning was encouraged as children interacted with these artefacts. For example, children considered the size of dinosaurs by lying on the floor, measuring themselves against dinosaur bones.

3. The quality of interactions between educators and children – as in early learning programs in general – is central to effective museum learning experiences. Novel objects or artefacts are obviously a highlight of children’s learning at the museum, but it is how interactions with artefacts are supported by museum staff and early childhood educators that influences engagement and learning. Responding to children’s questions, building a narrative around unique objects, repeating new concepts and encouraging children to explore features of exhibits all promote deeper engagement with museum education programs.
Implications for policy and practice
Practical and logistical issues matter as a starting point for making the most of a visit to the museum, or hosting a visit from museum presenters. Ensuring that all children can hear the presenter, see the artefacts and have an opportunity to touch and handle parts of the exhibit are the foundation of a successful visit.

Educators can enrich children’s experience of museum visits by building learning experiences around the topic and content of the museum’s education program. This includes books, stories, songs, artworks and access to props that allow children to play with knowledge and narratives they explore at the museum. Importantly, building this content into the curriculum is important both before and after the visit. Children’s learning at the museum begins with the knowledge they bring to the experience and can be extended through play and conversations that follow the museum visit.

Public funding of museums that includes capacity for outreach education programs ensures that all children have access to these learning opportunities. For some families, financial and travel costs can create barriers that limit engagement with museums or galleries. Visits to the museum – or hosting an outreach program – in early learning programs provides museum experiences for all children.

Implications for research
Our study showed that educators prepare children for the logistics of the museum visit (e.g. catching the bus, having a picnic, how to participate in the program at the museum), but are less likely to engage with the content of the museum program. Future research should explore how educators can extend learning experiences, and what best supports children’s deep learning about concepts explored museum programs.

Museum staff are experienced presenters and have expert content knowledge, but they may have limited training in pedagogy. Future research could explore how museum staff can be supported by professional learning that expands their skills in learning interactions with young children.

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Suggested Citation

References


About us
The Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood (REEaCh) Hub was established in 2018 with funding from the Leaper Foundation. Our purpose is to make a sustained impact upon the lives of young Australians through advancing the quality of early learning experiences for all children. The REEaCh Hub works to translate research findings into real-life solutions so that all young children can realize their potential.

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