

PRACTICE NOTE

Young children's art education in the museum and gallery context in Aotearoa New Zealand: Practice notes for teachers of early learners

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Abstract

Changes to the New Zealand Ministry of Education's funding for access to specialist education services in museums and art galleries in Aotearoa New Zealand (enriching local curriculum) has created the potential for an increase in visits to these institutions by young learners, and particularly those in the early childhood education (ECE) sector. A rationale for the inclusion of young children in art museum or gallery education programmes is highlighted. Strategies for teachers and gallery educators to enhance enriching local curriculum learning experiences for young learners in these contexts are suggested.

Introduction

Children, like adults, have the right to enjoy cultural citizenship by having access to a range of opportunities for leisure, education, arts, and cultural experiences. Mai and Gibson (2011) argue that this type of participation constitutes an important dimension of citizenship, and that young children, like adults, need to be considered legitimate "cultural citizens" (p. 356). Children, they argue, have the right to freely enjoy this aspect of citizenship that involves access to, and participation in, the rich opportunities for education and cultural experiences that the arts provide. One way this can be achieved is through the facilitation of children's visits to art museums and galleries (McNaughton, 2019; Terreni, 2017).

The positive learning experiences for young children that occur in these settings have been well researched internationally (Anderson et al., 2002; Bell, 2010; Bowers, 2012; Knutson et al., 2011; Piscitelli et al., 2003; Terreni, 2017).

Children's cognitive, aesthetic, kinaesthetic, affective, social, and cultural learning experiences, as well as their curiosity and receptivity to new ideas, can be cultivated in art museum and gallery settings (McNaughton, 2010). Art museums and galleries can provide young children attending early childhood centres with important learning opportunities that support their understanding of both cultural heritage and visual art.

While the Ministry of Education continues to fund access to art museums and galleries for the primary and secondary schools' sector, recent changes by the Ministry have opened new opportunities for younger learners (Ministry of Education, 2019). This has been particularly good news for teachers and children in the early childhood education (ECE) sector. New funding mechanisms means that ECE services, for the most part, can now access the guided educational programmes run by skilled art educators offered in art museums and galleries.

Strategies for enriching local curriculum experiences

With the advent of changes to the funding environment, teachers of young children (and art museum and gallery educators whose institution has obtained an enriching local curriculum (ELC) contract for the provision of cross-sector education services), now need to develop a deeper understanding about how young children learn in these contexts, and to develop increased pedagogical awareness of best practice for working with this age group. The following section suggests useful strategies for making visits to art museums and galleries a successful experience for all involved. The recommendations here draw on the findings of the authors' prior research and experience, as well as the wider literature.

Planning a visit

The literature suggests art museum and gallery visiting needs serious thought and planning so that learning opportunities for the children are maximised (Andersen et al., 2002; Greene et al., 2014; McNaughton, 2010; Terreni, 2017). This requires teaching teams to be thoughtful about the visiting process and what happens before, during, and after a visit. This may need to involve strategic planning before a visit takes place.

Communication, co-operation, and thinking about possible compromises may be needed to be made when visiting an art museum or gallery with young children, and ideas need to be discussed with teachers and art museum educators. For example, shifting the expectation of ECE teachers that a visit will be a completely hands-on learning experience to one that recognises that significant eyes-on learning experiences are utilised in these environments as a means of engaging with art works (Terreni, 2015). Familiarisation with the New Zealand early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) can help art museum and gallery educators identify the pedagogical directions that teachers of young children are required to undertake in Aotearoa, as well as the types of learning outcomes that are expected.

For early childhood teachers, many of whom will have varying degrees of experience of gallery visiting, planning for visits will require team discussions about the purpose and goals of a visit as well as planning for all the learning experiences that need to happen before, during, and after a visit (Andersen et al, 2002). Team discussions are a place where this can be unpacked, and where issues and fears that teachers may have about the art museum learning context and its suitability for young learners can be discussed and hashed out. Another discussion point may involve determining group size for visits. Small-group excursions offer better learning opportunities for children and teachers (Terreni, 2017).

Teachers accessing relevant research on gallery and museum visiting may help them make more informed decisions about their choices. These decisions can be made in conjunction with the art museum or gallery educator of the venue for the proposed visit, who will have a clear view on the educational possibilities of the current exhibition for the group. Discussion with teachers of young children will enable art educators to better understand the needs of the children, both developmentally and in relation to the current educational interests being pursued in their centres or schools.

Communication

As previously mentioned, good communication between teachers and the art museum and gallery educators is essential. This helps teachers to better understand specific art museum or gallery protocols, to determine an appropriate time for a visit, and also to feel confident negotiating (rather

than simply accepting) how the learning experiences for the children will take place. Teachers undertaking a comprehensive discussion about their children's learning experiences with art gallery educators before their visit can ensure they are clear about what to expect from the visit as well as assisting the art museum or gallery educator in providing a successful programme that can meet their needs.

It is important that teachers share their children's current learning interests with art gallery and museum educators and outline their goals for the visit. This practice is already well established for primary and secondary school visits to museums and galleries, and it is clearly very relevant for ECE centres as well. As a result, there can be an increased focus on individualised programmes by art museum and gallery educators through creating better connections with teachers to meet the needs of their children. For example, it may be that ECE teachers and art museum or gallery educators decide to focus on a few specific artworks that connect to children's interests for a concentrated time, rather than planning a whole gallery tour.

Good communication can occur through face-to-face meetings, email, or telephone conversations. It also creates a space for improved understanding and co-operation regarding the pedagogical approaches that might be adopted for the visit, for example, whether the visit is a teacher-led or child-led learning experience or a combination of both. Teaching resources that might be used to support the children's learning, and the levels of engagement of early childhood teachers and parents (who may wish to accompany their children) throughout the visit, can be determined through this type of discussion.

Perhaps one of the main areas of discussion that needs to happen relates to levels of surveillance in relation to young children's visits. Terreni's (2017) study showed clearly that many teachers of young children have often experienced levels of scrutiny that have left them feeling not only uncomfortable but also discriminated against. More effort needs to be taken by art museums and galleries about training guards and/or hosts to interact with young children (as well as the teachers and parents who accompany them) in a way that clearly welcomes young visitors, and that generates a feeling of trust. Art museum and gallery educators can play a role in ensuring this is communicated to support staff when young children and their teachers are visiting and could more actively incorporate the support staff into a visit. Protecting an art collection is vital,

but making visitors feel welcome, trusted, and included is equally important (Sandell, 1998, 2007). Small-group visits can help with this and, at the same time, create more opportunities for quality interactions with art educators.

Undertaking guided visits

One benefit of a guided lesson for young children visiting that is hosted by a gallery educator (rather than self-guiding), is that the gallery educator is experienced in working with varied groups in the gallery space and will have many positive approaches for engaging students in regard to a range of artworks. McNaughton (2019) found that art museum and gallery educators in Aotearoa believe that children should feel comfortable and have a sense of ownership of the venue and that welcoming communities and increasing their sense of ownership of the venue provides an effective way to engage children in the environment.

Art museum and gallery educators can act as a conduit between the gallery and the visitor, and this can be a learning experience for all involved—children, teachers, and possibly parents who accompany them. It can often be a mutual learning exchange, where teachers and parents can gain knowledge about how to use artworks to enrich children’s learning, and where gallery educators learn from the ECE teachers how to better work with and understand young children. Confidence and trust will develop mutually as visits are repeated, and the educators from both parties become more experienced by regularly working together. McNaughton (2019) describes optimal learning provision in galleries based on the idea of a “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991), where all visitors during a session, including parents and centre educators, can be actively part of the learning.

Professional development for art museum and gallery educators and teachers of young children

One issue with Ministry of Education-contracted education funding such as ELC is that professional development for art museum and gallery educators is not built into the funding arrangement. Consequently, this needs to be an art museum or gallery initiative. Connection between teachers and art museum and gallery educators through professional development forums can contribute to greater professional understanding by teachers of the relevant learning

approaches for younger children for both groups. Professional development for teachers that is held in situ by art museums or galleries through inclusive teachers' evenings to promote their new exhibitions can be an effective mode of delivery.

Marketing of exhibitions and the provision of useful resources

A connection with schools and ECE centres through a relevant marketing process may enable ECE teachers to have a better knowledge of what is on offer for guided visits, as well as better access to art museum and gallery resources. Resources for primary schools can readily be adapted to the ECE context. For instance, education resource packs or information sheets often contain good-quality photographs of artworks that may be of interest to young children and that support an ECE centre's inquiry focus or subject investigation.

Conclusion

This article suggests that the Ministry of Education's new ELC funding model provides an incentive for art museums and galleries to capitalise on the potential wealth of important learning opportunities for their young visitors, particularly those attending ECE services. Local curriculum enrichment, discovery, and learning for young children in this educational context is something to be fostered. However, good communication, collaboration, and, sometimes, compromise between ECE teachers and art museum and gallery educators is vital for optimising art museum education for young children.

The visitor experience for teachers of young children can be enhanced further through the provision of professional development for both ECE teachers and art museum and gallery personnel, where ideas and information about learning and teaching can be shared and discussed. Strategies for increased inclusion of the ECE sector through marketing and the availability of relevant resources is also likely to improve teachers' awareness of the rich teaching and learning opportunities available at an art museum or gallery and, consequently, help to improve the visiting experiences for young children.

This is a time of considerable change in New Zealand education but, as always, educators need to invest in opportunities that enhance the learning experiences of their young students. By fostering art museum and gallery

visiting, teachers of young children and art educators can also help to create a generation of children who will go on to be enthusiastic art museum and gallery visitors throughout their lives. We believe that it would not be hard for gallery educators and teachers to make the changes we have suggested and in doing so the potential gains for children's learning are great.

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