

Listening to young children's voices in museum spaces

Lynda Kelly	Sarah Main	Sue Dockett	Bob Perry	Sarah Heinrich
Australian Museum	Australian Museum	University of Western Sydney	University of Western Sydney	University of Western Sydney

Abstract

Increased opportunities to engage with young children in meaningful ways and significant changes in conceptual and theoretical views of young children have resulted in heightened interest in understanding children's perspectives on their experiences.

Museums are cultural institutions, representing the societies in which they exist. In many contexts, children's voices have been absent in the evaluation and planning of museum spaces developed for them. This project recognizes children as experts on their own experiences and seeks their views on a museum space specifically designed for them. It provides opportunities for children to consider their understandings and impressions of that space, data about how they perceive and interact in the space and how they would change the space.

Introduction

Recently, there has been an increasing interest in accessing and understanding children's perspectives on their own lives. As well as the influence of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1999), which emphasises children's rights to have a say in relation to situations that impact upon them, changing theoretical and conceptual understandings of children have resulted in a shift in the ways children are viewed. This project reflects such a shift, where children are viewed as competent experts on their own lives (Tolfree & Woodhead, 1999), whose approaches to life and choices are regarded as interesting in their own right (James & Prout, 1997). Recognising children's competence places great importance on gaining children's perspectives across a range of environments and experiences.

Recognising children as experts on their own lives and experiences reminds us that adults cannot assume that their views reflect those of children (Clark & Moss, 2001; Lansdown, 2005). It also recognises the strengths and capabilities of children as their voices and views are heard, rather than some prevailing views of children as dependent and vulnerable. The immediacy of children's interests, concerns and issues also promotes a focus on the present and on ways to improve the current experiences of children rather than considering primarily the investment potential of children (Prout, 2003). In a context such as a museum, recognising children's perspectives is important in order that resources can be directed towards their access to, and participation in, museum experiences.

The Australian Museum is a natural history museum that opened in Sydney in 1827. It prides itself on being Australia's first museum and houses an extensive collection of natural science and cultural artefacts (Australian Museum, n. d.). In mid-1999, the Australian Museum opened Kids' Island, a play and learning space designed specifically for children aged 0-5 years. Extensive consultations were undertaken with adults in the early childhood community in the planning and development of Kids' Island.

Kids' Island consisted of a soft play area for infants and spaces based on the themes of cubbyhouses, exploring the sea (boat), land (forest), and air (balloon and tunnel). A wide range of natural history artefacts, multicultural and multi-sensory resources were incorporated into the space. Kids' Island is promoted as a place where children can:

- Play in the *cubby* house
- "Sail" the boat, fish from the edge and grapple with the toy crabs, sharks and fish.
- Climb up the ramp into the hot air balloon, get a bird's eye view of Kids Island then slide down the slippery dip back to the ground.
- Play dress ups.
- Investigate the wombat's burrow.
- Children use Kids' Island in a multitude of imaginative ways, just visit and see for yourself! (Australian Museum, n. d.)



Since it opened, Kids' Island has been visited often by many families and early childhood groups. Many are repeat visitors and the Australian Museum regards the children who visit Kids' Island as a significant audience – both in the short and long term.

Kids' Island is currently being redeveloped as part of a larger redevelopment and restructure of the museum. This has provided a unique opportunity to consult with children about the museum space, their perspectives on what they would like in the museum, and to have these views incorporated into the redevelopment. Many of the children and families visiting Kids' Island are experienced museum goers. While there are certainly constraints in terms of the building and available space, there are many issues on which children's views can have a major impact.

This paper focuses on the methodological approaches utilised within the project to gain children's perspectives. The research approaches are significant because they seek children's views in a real and meaningful context, using authentic approaches and strategies. This adds to a growing research field where children's views are actively sought and listened to, utilising Borland's (2001, p. 111) definition of consultation with children as 'seeking the views of children as a guide to action'. Such consultation involves the processes of active listening – hearing, interpreting and co-constructing meanings with children in approaches that are not limited to the spoken word (Clark, McQuail, & Moss, 2003).

Methodology

Research participants

Research participants were 40 children aged 0-5 years, who visited the Australian Museum, and their families. These children and families were regular visitors to the museum, and so were familiar with the existing space and the museum staff who spent time in Kid's Island. Data were collected by a team of researchers and museum staff, ensuring that children and families interacted with familiar people, while establishing relationships with members of the research team.

Initially, parents were invited to participate in the project, and, where appropriate, to discuss potential participation with their children. Where parents gave consent, the project was described to children and they were invited to complete their own assent form indicating in ways that were meaningful for them that they were interested in participating in the research. Where children indicated disinterest, they were not coerced into participation even if parental consent had been given. Sometimes, children preferred to watch others participate before making a decision, and this was accommodated. On other occasions, children were eager to participate in one form of data collection, but not others. Still other children participated in tasks where other family members could also participate. The provision of multiple ways of participating supported this.

Data collection approaches

Data collection occurred during the first half of 2006. The range of approaches within the project emphasised choices for children, recognising that not all approaches were attractive to all children, or even to the same child at different times. The combination of verbal and non-verbal communication required across the different approaches also provided opportunities for very young children and children with special needs to be involved in the project.

The following approaches were used:

1. *Observation*

Building on the tradition of participant observation as an important approach to data generation with young children (Elfer & Selleck, 1999), this approach focused on the actions and the contexts in which they occurred. Observation was also used to inform other approaches, indicating the sorts of approaches likely to engage the interest of children in other aspects of the project (Clark & Moss, 2001).

2. *Interviews*

Rather than structured interviews, the project used conversations with children, usually in small groups in familiar settings. The aim of these conversations was "to hand over the agenda to children, so that they can control the pace and direction of the conversation, raising and exploring topics" (Mayall, 2000, p. 133). With the consent of those involved, conversations were audio-taped.

3. *Structured activities*

These activities included using puppets and dolls as research tools, in story retelling, role plays and conversations. The tools often served to help children feel at ease, where the puppet or doll became the centre of attention, rather

than the child (Clark et al., 2003). Other structured activities included ranking games, where children were asked to place photographs of favoured experiences and interactions in a rank order and were invited to discuss their views about this.

4. *Multi-sensory approaches*

These included:

- a) the use of photographs, with children using digital cameras to photograph museum spaces from their own perspectives and to produce their own record of experiences and interactions.
- b) children undertaking tours and making maps of their museum experience. This approach encourages children to articulate their local knowledge and experiences in a manner that does not rely on the spoken word. Tours involved young children taking researchers or other adults (often family members) on a tour of the space (Clark & Moss, 2001). Children not only directed the tour by deciding where to go and when, they also directed the documentation of the experience, choosing to record it in drawing, with a camera, or with audio-recordings or video-recordings. In some instances, maps were constructed to add to the documentation, and in others role play opportunities were added, where children adopted the role of an expert showing a friend around the museum.
- c) audio-recording and/or video-recording, where children made recordings of their experiences. In each case, children controlled the recording equipment and the recording experience.
- d) drawing and other art/construction activities. Children were invited to draw preferred experiences/spaces within the museum and what they would like to see in a museum. Their annotated comments, when considered in conjunction with the drawings, provided an avenue for expressing their perspectives and understandings (Dockett & Perry, 2005).
- e) journals were used to seek information from children and families about ongoing interactions related to museum experiences. To facilitate this, photos taken by the children, photos of constructions made by the children, or of children engaging in experiences, were provided to children and families. The journal consisted of a collection of A4 pages in a plastic folder. An overview of the project and the purpose of the journal were included. Several of the pages had headings to give some guidance such as *Something funny at the museum*, *A special treasure at the museum* and *What I like to do with my family at the museum*. Several blank pages were included and more pages could be added. Children and family members were invited to reflect on the experiences and to record any follow up discussions or interests that emerged.

5. *Feedback sessions*

These were built into the project to ensure that children were aware of the purpose of the consultation and to provide opportunities to check on the information obtained. Feedback sessions provided opportunities for data checking and discussion, and indicated to children that they were being listened to, with their views and perspectives being taken seriously. One popular feedback approach was to place (with permission) copies of photos or drawings on the walls and to group these around emerging themes.

All data remained the property of the children involved. Where the children agreed, digital records of drawings or constructions were kept by the researchers and copies of photographs and video records were also retained. The result was that children and families retained the original data. Journals were forwarded to the researchers (either by mail or on the next visit to the museum). With permission, they were scanned and the originals returned.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed interpretively using principles of grounded theory. Throughout the interpretive process, the focus was on the meaning constructed by the children. Triangulation of data was facilitated by the use of multiple methods and by the opportunities for children to both check data and elaborate upon these. The researchers have been cautious about assuming that triangulation is a simple process when researching with young children, recognising that children's perspectives change, as contexts change and as their lives change. Hence the expectation has not been that children will always present a consistent single message about what is important to them. Rather, it is expected that children will focus on what is important to them at any one time in any specific context (Graue & Walsh, 1998).

Results

This section incorporates some general patterns emerging from the data and illustrates these with some examples. An extended example (Caitlin's journal) indicates these patterns as well as the engagement on one child and her family in the project.

Several general patterns emerged from the children's perspectives in this project. These included:

1. children's competence with technology

In addition to the technology employed in the project (digital camera, audio and video recorder), children demonstrated considerable facility and confidence in the use of equipment around the museum, such as microscopes, miniature cameras and computers.

2. the social nature of learning and interacting in the museum

Children were eager to participate in a wide range of experiences, often with family members, older children or friends. Sometimes the presence of adults facilitated a sense of security, at other times social interactions made the experiences much more enjoyable (as reported by the children). Involving others also facilitated shared meaning-making and promoted ongoing conversations and interactions related to those experiences. Adults played an important role in children's experiences of the museum.

Lachlan holding a stick insect

I asked Sarah to take this photo of me because the man in Search and Discover let me hold a stick insect.



3. *the attraction of 'real' as well as 'play' objects*

Children were excited to have a play space in the museum and were keen to see a range of familiar as well as unfamiliar artefacts within that space. However, they were also very keen to explore the 'real' as well as the 'play' aspects of the museum.

Particular interest was expressed in:

- a. seeing animals and objects up close – exhibits that could be touched or artefacts that could be explored with microscopes or cameras were popular.

Kangaroo by Lachlan

I like the kangaroo and that you can pat it.



- b. objects of varying sizes and scales. The skeletons of large Australian animals (existing and extinct), were of interest, partly because of their size, as were some small items such as gems and minerals.

Skulls by Lachlan

"Ooh, I want to take a
picture of these. I like
the little skulls"



- c. context and the importance of artefacts within context – for example animals within habitats

Cockroaches by Madeleine's Dad

These are yucky
cockroaches



4. *children's sense of humour*

Some exhibits in the museum caused great mirth among children. One popular example was a human skeleton sitting on a bicycle and another skeleton sitting on a lounge chair accompanied by a skeleton of a dog and a bird skeleton in a cage. Other exhibits reflected taboo areas, such as faeces from different animals.

Skeleton on Lounge by William

S: What else is good in
here?

William: Um, that one, the
lounge (runs towards
skeleton in lounge chair).

S: What do you like about it

W: Um, it's sitting on the
lounge and the skeleton
is in the cage (laughs).

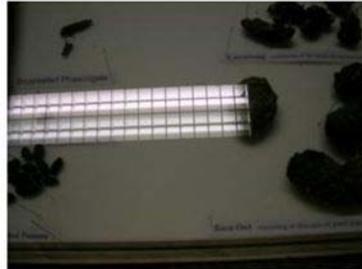
S: Does it make you laugh?

W: Yeah



Poo by Madeleine

"The yucky poo... poo,
blah"



5. *making connections*

Children identified connections between experiences in the museum and those at home or in other settings. Connections included the nature of experiences (such as taking photos at home and in the museum) and the objects involved (such as play and drawing materials). The connections made by children were not necessarily those made by adults. While some children were very eager to engage in learning specific information, others constructed narratives that related to imagination and pretence (for example, exploring the gems and minerals to see where the fairies lived).

Birds by Lachlan

I like the really colorful
bird. We get these in
our backyard.



Photo and Comment by Eva

"The little fairies, fairies
live in there. They
could even go inside
the tiny holes."



Some children were eager to investigate specific aspects of the exhibits. These children were sometimes frustrated by spaces that promoted play, and wanted more opportunities to investigate 'like the bigger kids'. The physical set up of the museum (such as the height of benches, controls for microscopes) sometimes made this difficult.

Butterflies by Josh

I like looking at the
butterflies but can't
turn the light on by
myself.



Microscope by Madeleine

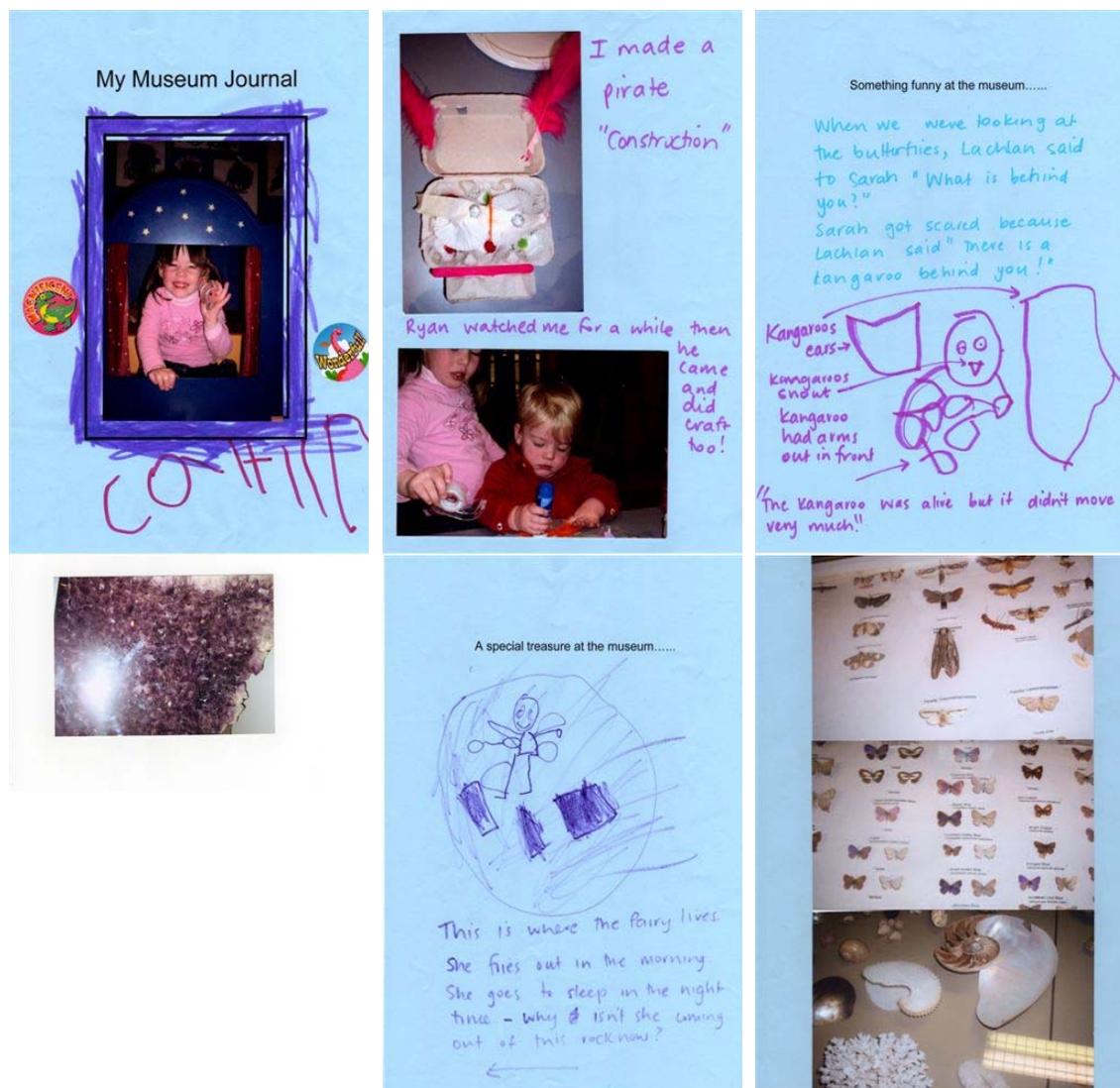
I like using this but
where there are big
people around I don't
always get a good
turn.

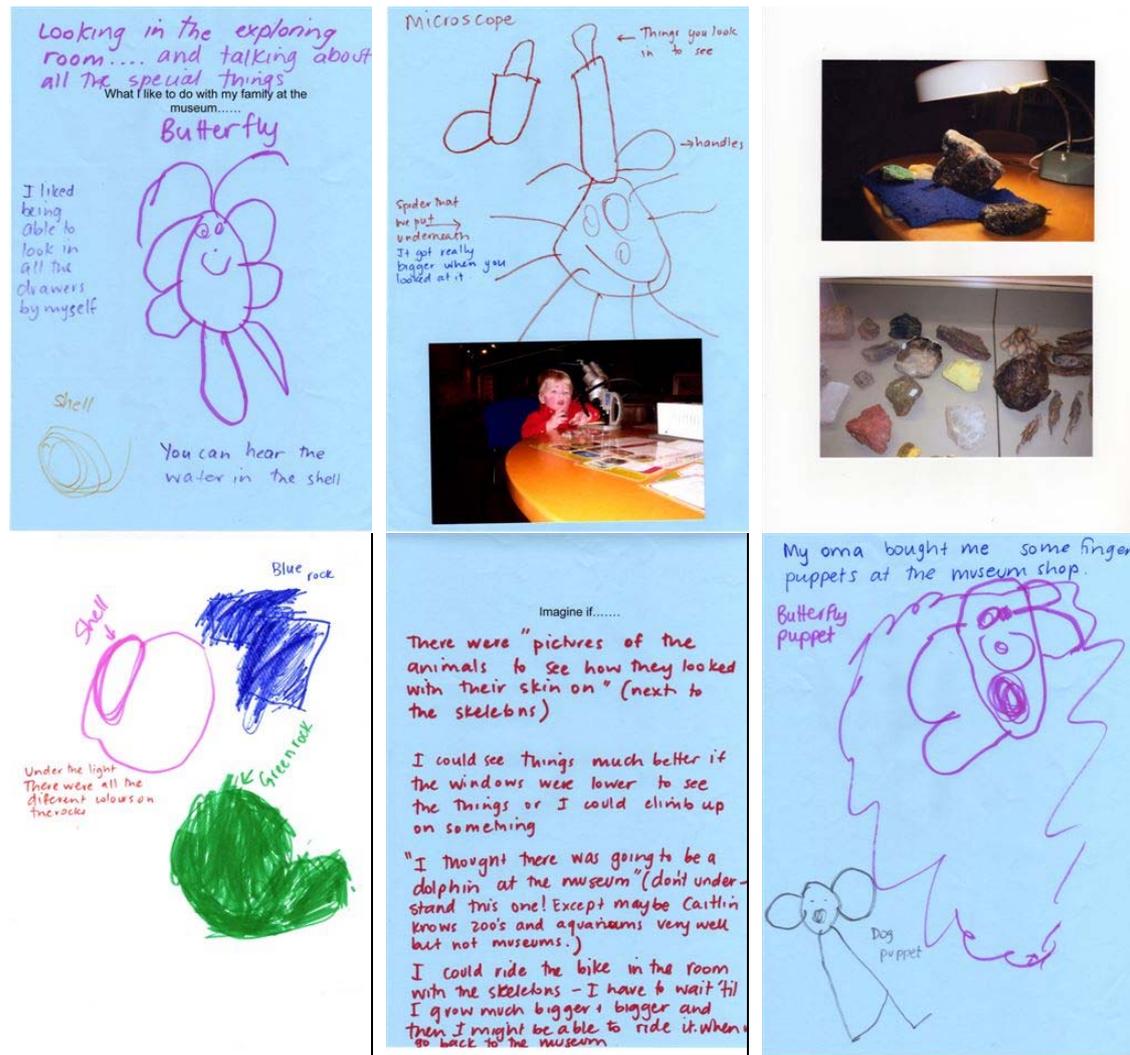


The connections made by children were not limited to the museum. Journal entries and discussions indicated that museum visits were far from isolated events. Rather, they occurred with specific social and cultural contexts and incorporated many of the patterns of interaction and expectations that were constructed within families and other social groupings.

Caitlin's journal

Caitlin is aged three-and-a-half-years. She visits the museum with her mother and her 19 month old brother. Sometimes her cousin, Lachlan (aged 4), her grandmother or other friends and their family members come with them. Caitlin's mother and her aunts usually met up in the city one day each week and do something together – such as visiting the museum. During one visit, Caitlin and Lachlan both participated in a range of activities about the museum. Some extracts from Caitlin's journal indicate her preferences (as discussed with her mother).





Caitlin's journal describes not only her experiences at the museum but also her reflections on these. It documents her engagement in drawing and construction activities, includes photos she has taken herself and photos she asked others to take so that she was included. The entries in the journal highlight social interactions at the museum – with her brother, cousin, grandmother and a researcher. They also document conversations with her mother during the weeks following her museum visit.

Caitlin describes playing at the museum – pretending that the fairy lives in the amethyst crystal, coming out in the morning and sleeping at night. She also includes photos of collections she is interested in – butterflies and shells – as well as some comments about these *You can hear the water in the shell*. Her interest in the microscope and how it works is noted by her photo, drawing and comment that *The spider got really bigger when you look at it*. As well as including things that interest her at the museum, Caitlin notes some constraints: *I could see things much better if the windows were lower to see the things or I could climb up on something* and *I could ride the bike in the room with the skeletons – I have to wait till I grow much bigger and bigger and then I might be able to ride it when I go back to the museum*.

The journals have provided a valuable compilation of children's views, completed at times convenient to the children and families, often away from the museum. They have provided time to reflect on experiences and perspectives and to record different views over different times. The use of journals has been significant in recognising that children's interactions with museums do not begin and end with the actual museum visit. The discussions and follow-up experiences, issues of interest and concern raised by children well after the museum visit have a major impact on whether or not children and their families return to the museum and, if they do, what they do when they are there.

Conclusions

Using a range of approaches, it has been possible to gain insights from children about their museum experiences. These insights make an important contribution to the development of relevant spaces and experiences for children. While this is an important start, it is also important to continue to consult with children in relevant and meaningful ways to provide ongoing evaluative data.

The children involved in this project demonstrated a range of competencies in sharing their experiences and in recording these using the various approaches available to them. The data collected have been reported back to children and clear messages have been conveyed to museum designers about what the children expect within the museum. There is a strong expectation from both children and museum staff that young children are significant participants within the Australian Museum, that their voices are listened to and valued.

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