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### The Prehistoria Museum and Skull Store

Nina Simon summarises her work as “participatory techniques are design strategies that have specific value and can be applied in cultural institutions to powerful effect.” (“What’s Next”). She emphasizes that the directions museums are heading in currently are declining in popularity with diminishing numbers of people, specifically diverse people, visiting them yearly (Simon “Preface”). Simon believes that the key to unlocking the next level of museums is turning them to a participatory nature. The exhibit I have chosen to analyse is the small museum on the back of the Prehistoria Museum and Skull Store, an oddity shop which resides in downtown Toronto. It prides itself on collecting items which are “ethically and sustainably sourced,” and covers a wide range of objects from Cuneiform to a full t-rex statue. Although not specifically designed and advertised for kids, the small museum is set up in a way that caters to their needs and wants, specifically in terms of being participatory through their collaborative events and attached store in which children can engage with and even purchase items similar to those in the museum section.

In my opinion, the small sections of grouped items among a massive selection of things and topics to explore is a very effective children’s museum. There is also a unique ability at this museum to take the knowledge home with you, as they sell nearly everything they display within the store to some capacity. If a child is interested in taxidermy, bones, fossils, or anything else they saw in the displays they can purchase something small (or large) scientifically connected to

it like a small fossil as opposed to a more classic gift shop which would sell less educational things like plushies and tshirts. Additionally, not everything was behind glass with some things being available to be touched, examined closely, and played with. As Perry Nodelman points out, there is an inherent value of touchability. When one crosses from the museum into the shop at this location, the same types of items become available not just for display and learning, but for touching and taking home to play with and touch indefinitely, any and all activities associated with children and their learning/development/playing (Nodelman 2018). He points out that “there are many picture books designed exactly with [children’s] activities in mind,” (Nodelman 23, 2018) why not have a section of the museum which takes it into account?

When I explored the museum and store, there seemed to be something for everyone available to look at and enjoy from a vast amount of topics ranging from science to history, alongside some lovely and passionate staff who love to share their knowledge with kids and adults alike. I believe the staff at this location are a huge portion of what allows the museum section to be participatory, as they are extremely knowledgeable and able to not only answer questions, but discuss to greater detail and context what the children take interest in. The wide range of objects allows for their interest to be kept and maintained, and more likely for some information they found interesting to be retained. On top of this, if they find a section they adore, they can pick out a souvenir that is scientific/historical to take home with them and keep them learning and engaged.

The specifically participatory part of this museum I would like to discuss which is designed for children is its position to hold collaborative projects as explained by Simon designed to engage children (“Chapter 7” 2018). This use of the museum space in my opinion encourages learning as fun, learning what they are interested in and want to learn, as opposed to

being forced to go to a museum such as on a field trip. When I visited that evening there was a magic and sideshow performed by the owner of the museum just after its closing. When discussing it with him he told us that it was designed for children to get engaged with the materials around them, since the show takes place within the museum itself on a small stage. Not all the shows include the context of the museum, but nonetheless get the children into the space and provide positive reinforcement to encourage them to return. On top of that, even if the show within the museum was purely comedy and did not acknowledge the space it took place in, getting to the stage still forces the children and parents to walk past the exhibits, perhaps stopping at one they find interesting and learning something on the way (for example there is a two headed animals exhibit I simply could not walk past), and perhaps that encourages them to think of the museum differently. The participatory nature even when not engaging with the direct materials still brings the children to a place where they have the opportunity to choose to learn.

I do think that this museum could become even more participatory, even though it is beginning at a good place from being small and personal with a vibrant event space. There is always room for improvement and opportunities for more interactive learning. Most of the ability to touch the items happens in the shop, perhaps having more interactive games or activities in the museum itself would also help get kids more engaged. Nevertheless, if I have the opportunity to take a child to a museum the one I would choose is the Prehistoria Museum and Skull Store and purchase them a small item to take home with them.

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### Children Belong in Canadian Representation

The Canada Now exhibit is described as “Representing individuals, their communities, and their diverse life experiences, these images highlight various aspects of visibility and resilience.” It is curated by Denise Birkhofer and although it is not currently designed with children in mind, I believe that it could be very interesting to create a sister exhibit specifically depicting the experience of Canadian children to include them in the important discussion at hand of belonging in Canada. What makes their perspective especially important to empower is that youth, Inherent to their position of not yet being adult, have less autonomy in general as they grow up especially in terms of systems which revolve around them like the education system, child-rearing culture, and youth culture in popular media. Children have the unique perspective of being resilient in their diverse life experiences without the complete control of their choices and refined analytical skills of an adult. Children around Canada have very different experiences from both each other and Canadian adults, and therefore would have not only interesting perspectives to be showcased in this exhibit, but essential to becoming comprehensive.

Loizou and Charalambous (2017) assert that in a democratic society people take their empowerment from the freedom to make a variety of choices in their individual lives. This leads to their understanding that “for the democratic philosophy to be genuinely implemented in any early childhood setting, there needs to be a common understanding that ‘everyone has a valuable contribution to make.’” (440). The first thing I looked into was critical museology in order to

contextualise the historical leaving out of youth in curation of museums and the possibilities and challenges which lie in the movement to include them. According to Patterson (2021) critical museology refers to, “greater inclusion of marginalized communities and diversification of exhibition content, but children have been largely ignored in these efforts.” (330). In her paper she asserts that although critical museology has made extremely important steps towards decolonizing the museum and improving it as an inclusive institution for learning, the critical corner of children’s perspectives and contributions have been widely left out. She goes on to elaborate that there is extreme benefit for creating museums specifically designed to be effective at educating children, since they tend to be a massive consumer through school groups but are generally the least accommodated. Patterson (2021) references an exhibit which parts from a traditional museum setting in order to create one uniquely educational experience for kids: art at lower levels, less rules, etc. She also asserts through this exhibit that there is largely untapped potential of including children in the curation process. Through the exhibit Patterson represents to the reader that children have unique and meaningful contributions to make in conversations previously reserved for adults. For example I found one quote both fascinating and extremely meaningful philosophically from one of the children who helped curate the exhibit who said, “the older a mind is, the more it categorizes – what is good, what is bad.” (333).

There is proven value in giving agency to children in conversations which they are inherently a part of in terms of their education and the value added to important conversations through their perspective (Ekberg et al. 2022, Carter et al. 2015, Loizou and Charalambous 2017). In many fields such as medicine children are already given agency in conversations about their life with recognized benefits. This can be done on a sliding scale from giving youth full agency in the discussion and including them in ways that are meaningful to them but leaves

complex discussion to adults. Tag questions are often used in complex conversations in order to check in with the child in a way they will understand that they are still comfortable and feel included. In the case of medical care where children have no meaningful information on the side of their problem or care, their contribution in terms of their personal comfort is essential and can be ascertained through giving appropriate agency to the child by incorporating at least tag questions (Ekberg et al. 2022). To me, this inclusion of children in their own palliative care reflects the idea that children are more resilient and have more to contribute than they have historically been given credit for as they were assumed to be innocent and dumb. They are able to take horrible situations and not only look on the bright side, but creatively problem solve in order to achieve their goals (Carter et al. 2015). With this in mind, I will use a framework referred to as empowerment pedagogy in the curation process of my exhibit which recognizes the positive role of agency and empowerment plays in the quality of learning.

Empowerment Pedagogy as outlined by Loizou and Charalambous refers to the framework of childhood education which focuses on their rights, their agency, and their active participation in order to both involve youth in their own education as well as force adults to reflect on their position therein. It is essential when employing empowerment pedagogy to acknowledge the unique array of cultural and social as well as individual identity needs which will most likely be present across a class (Hubbard Maniglia 2020, Verhoven et al. 2021). Empowerment pedagogy through giving youth agency in their education aims to prepare children for the freedom of their adult life by “Acknowledge[ing] children as active agents and support[ing] them in participating in their daily environments, constructing their world, and learning.” (Loizou and Charalambous, 440). This is largely accomplished through allowing children a voice, allowing them to be active participants, and through education which includes

community alongside built in flexibility from adults and teachers to allow them the true agency in each circumstance (443). Participation in childhood education is also a key tool in this framework in order to allow children to share their voice and to treat them “as social partners who participate in the development of their lives and the world.” (441). Empowerment pedagogy focuses on creating a lens of a learning community in which children are both listened to and have their rights supported in order to create an environment ideal for their educational development. This framework improves senses of community and belonging among youth in educational settings (Loizou and Charalambous, 446) and allows for shifts in power dynamics from the teacher to the children among each other (Loizou and Charalambous, 448).

Now, I have explained that it is necessary to include children in important political discussions like that of belonging in Canada because of both the important contributions they have when given the agency to participate and the benefits to their education that come alongside. Not only have youth proven they have the ability to contribute meaningfully, they have proven that it is beneficial to their development into an adult with freedom and agency. With this in mind, my exhibit would start with a goal of being entirely curated by and for children while being supported by adults. In this way, children would be given full agency to express their thoughts, opinions, and insights into belonging in Canada from their unique and so far largely untold perspective. Due to their significant positive impacts on absorbed information, hands-on learning and conversation based learning would be incorporated into the plan from the beginning (Jant et al. 2014). However, I will not pick the content of the exhibit, instead I would find and guide a group of youth of diverse ages and experiences to curate it together. Youth would be given as much agency as possible in the curation, the environment, and the setup of display areas by youth themselves, allowing them full control of their contributions. By creating



a space made by children, I would aim to create an environment in which visiting youth are first invited to absorb and discuss the content of their peer curators before being invited to contribute in some way their own sense of Canadian identity. This would also be created by the curating youth, but will include some form of inviting the visiting youth to draw or write a contribution pertaining to their own Canadian identity.

The target audience of the sister exhibit would be school and family groups, which will require catering to the educational needs of youth of all ages, however not necessarily always at the same time. One thing I looked into was how mixing ages from the youngest to oldest youth versus separating by age group would impact the learning environment, and found that multi-age groups when effectively applied have widely recognized benefits to childhood education socially, behaviourally, and intellectually (Wiechmann et al. 2019). For this reason, I want the exhibit to be designed in a way that caters to youth education from the youngest to oldest both in combination with each other and separately. For younger kids I found most scholarship on the importance of interaction and manipulation in their learning experience. Interaction with caregivers, staff, and labels have varying impacts on educational outcomes based on the agency and comprehension the child retains from the engagement (Letourneau et al. 2021). For older kids I found that the physical space they are in to learn has significant impacts on their educational outcomes (Kariippanon et al. 2020) alongside independence with guidance allowing teens the confidence to discuss important topics without necessarily the discipline and self control required to stay on topic and appropriate (Loizou and Charalambous 2017). With guidance from the interests and ideas of the curating youth with context from my research on effective education, the exhibit will most likely be mixing hands-on activities with labels and

staff to create an environment which empowers conversation between both younger and older kids in one group and separately.

The role adults would play in the exhibit was a very important aspect of this section to ensure they enhance youth learning without overpowering their autonomy in the conversation of belonging (Carr et al. 2018). This is nuanced as when adults assist in hands-on learning they must do so without reducing opportunity for trial and error by acting as a mediator who allows for and facilitates the contribution of their thoughts and experiences to the conversation (Letourneau et al. 2021). Staff would be an important aspect of the exhibit, acting as assistance for school groups with fewer adults to assist as well as gently correct and help the parents if necessary for family groups. They would vary their roles depending on the age of the youth visiting in order to give them the most agency while maintaining a safe and educational space. For younger kids it will lean more towards aiding them in comprehending and coming to a conclusion on how they feel about it, while for older kids they will mediate conversation to keep it appropriate and on topic.

Although it would not be relevant to the creation of the exhibit for youth, I imagine that the curated art in the display style of the youth would also be added as an extension to the adult exhibit. Rather than adapting it to the nuances of adults like they are used to in museum settings by lifting images to eye level etc., I think I would rather place the exhibit exactly as it is for adults to wander through and see. That way they could take as much value as possible from knowing they are experiencing the perspective of those youth.

Children are empowered in their education when it is recognized that children also have things they can teach adults when they are given the agency, support, and tools to do so. In the end, I cannot really create a clear picture of what my sister's exhibit would look like because as

an adult that would defeat the purpose of it being by and for children. However, employing empowerment pedagogy in its creation by a group of children with supporting adults would create a space for children to meaningfully experience the belonging experience of other youth as well as express their experience of belonging in Canada. Having an exhibit about specifically youth identity, resilience, and belonging which was curated and designed by and for people their age would allow for youth to be comfortable and empowered as they learn about Canadian diversity and subsequently expand both the pool of generated knowledge on the topic and the genuine reach of the message.

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