



Issue Theme: Rethinking Children's Museum Learning and Experiences: New Perspectives and Challenges

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INTRODUCTION



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As both an artist and a trained teacher, I am familiar with educational theories and teaching pedagogies. Yet, I've always believed that true art-making can't be confined to fixed methods. It flourishes through openness, not prescription. When I began an internship as an art teacher at a primary school, I felt confident I could strike a balance between structured learning and creative freedom. I imagined a classroom where children could explore their ideas, guided but not restricted. But after a few months, the excitement I started with began to fade. I found myself caught between competing demands: the need to meet programmatic goals while also trying to teach responsively and creatively. I couldn't simply let students do whatever they wanted, as I had outcomes to deliver, lessons to complete, and expectations to meet. Their final artworks needed to show what they'd learned, and in many ways, they became a reflection of my success as a teacher. I began asking myself: Why couldn't I let children lead the creative process? What was I afraid of? Was I truly fostering creative freedom, or just simulating it within a predetermined path?

That tension between freedom and structure, and between the child's voice and the institutional frame, sits at the heart of this special issue. In museums, too, we encounter similar contradictions. Despite decades of advocacy for child-centered and constructivist learning, some museum programs continue to reflect traditional models where children are passive receivers of knowledge rather than co-creators of experience. Too often, they are seen through adult-centered lenses, reduced to "little learners" (Kirk & Buckingham, 2018) instead of being recognized as full participants in meaning-making.

This issue emerges from a desire to challenge those assumptions and reimagine how children can engage with museums as active, imaginative, and empowered individuals. The articles in this collection explore a wide spectrum of innovative practices – from participatory curatorial strategies and early childhood storytelling to interdisciplinary collaborations and children-led programming. Some contributors examine how art-science partnerships, financial literacy programs, or digital platforms can become conduits for dialogue, empathy, and co-learning. Others reflect on how to nurture children's emotional and social development through museum spaces that are both responsive and inclusive.

What ties these varied contributions together is a shared urgency to rethink the museum not merely as a site of education, but as a living space of relational learning, where children's perspectives, identities, and lived experiences are not only acknowledged but actively shape the design and delivery of programs.

For me, engaging with these works has been both inspiring and humbling. They remind us that rethinking children's museum learning is not only a professional undertaking but also a personal one. It calls on us to question our roles, examine our fears, and move toward a more reciprocal, experimental, and imaginative way of being with children.

I invite you to engage with these contributions not only as reflections, but as catalysts – for conversation, reimagination, and meaningful change.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

About the author

Chang Xu completed her PhD at Toi Rauwhāangi College of Creative Arts, Massey University, Aotearoa, New Zealand. Her PhD research centred around fostering greater involvement of creative practitioners in children's museum and gallery education while promoting collaboration among various roles within art museums. Chang's passion lies in the realm of collaborative and interdisciplinary research, with a particular focus on the digital transformation and innovation within museum education. She is also keen on understanding the needs of people with disabilities to develop more inclusive museum programs, ensuring that museums and galleries are not only multicultural but also accessible to individuals of all abilities.

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