

The Role of Museums in Primary School Education

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Abstract

A museum is a building where a collection of objects from the past are kept as exhibits for the general public. It is a primary source of evidence of the way humankind situated itself in the environment. Museums may be related to various fields: natural history, art, science, culture, etc. However, the purpose remains constant: it is an institution in the service of society with an aim to educate people. Traditionally, education is perceived in divisions such as ‘informal’ and ‘formal’ education. In such conceptualisations, formal education institutions, such as universities and schools, are often viewed as the base from which students ‘pay visits’ to other sites, such as factories, post-offices and museums, and then return to their ‘base’. Such sites have the capacity to promote certain educational experiences and goals, and such visits are therefore advantageous to learners. Museums present a unique opportunity to engage students in many different areas of interest. In the context of primary school education, museum visits can provide children with some memorable experiences, as they open up a world of imagination and exploration. It is important to start cultivating an early appreciation for art and history in children. Certainly, we cannot expect them to magically develop an interest in museums and galleries at a later age. The paper explores the pedagogical and cultural-educational significance of museums with reference to learners at the primary stage of education, and ways in which they may be introduced to learning in an environment that is so different from any other learning experience.

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INTRODUCTION

Museums are primarily meant to educate people. Specifically, museums educate people about objects by providing them information on the exhibits, the material composition of the objects, how these objects were used, and why these objects were significant in people's lives. In other words, museums reveal how people of the past reacted to their environment. Furthermore, although a museum is perceived as a building that houses objects, the intent of a museum goes far beyond. It not only displays objects but also takes the utmost care for their preservation through temperature control, protective glass cases and regular cleaning; indicating that the past is of great significance to the present. Thus it is obvious that museum education is embedded in a framework in which the relation between teaching, learning, content and situation is taken into account.

To further the cause of education, entry to museums is almost always free or with a nominal fee. School students form a sizeable chunk of museum visitors. Yet, school authorities are diffident about ferrying primary school children to museums, citing a whole list of reasons. The paper suggests a transactional conceptualisation of museum pedagogy for sustainable museum education. The paper also attempts to explore the pedagogical and cultural-educational significance of museums, the challenges faced by school authorities in organising

museum visits, and most of all, how it need not be a boring experience for young learners.

MUSEUM PEDAGOGY

Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by all United Nations member states (to which India is a signatory), its 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) have guided the work to transform the world by ending poverty, protecting the planet and ensuring prosperity for all. The question of how sustainability can be incorporated into all areas of society has made curators and administrators of museums rethink about their approaches to society and education. Moreover, the adoption of Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO 2003 has contributed to the importance of intangible cultural heritage in museums which was ignored earlier.

Today, contemporary museums are demonstrating an increased interest in innovative ways of showcasing their exhibits. In 2019, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) adopted a recommendation from its sustainability working group, acknowledging the responsibility of museums in promoting a sustainable future. ICOM recommended that museums should support the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and use the "Transforming our World" 2030 Agenda as a framework to incorporate sustainability into their internal and external practices and educational programmes (ICOM, 2019).

A guidebook titled “Museums and Sustainable Development Goals” by McGhie was published as an initial effort to integrate museum education into the Agenda 2030 framework. The guidebook suggests that museums can play a vital role in promoting public education and engagement with the SDGs, particularly in relation to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) (McGhie, 2019). To achieve this, museums are encouraged to incorporate ESD into all educational programmes for people of all ages and abilities. Hence, integrating sustainability education into museums represents a fresh and innovative area of focus that presents a new set of challenges for museums and museum education.

Accordingly, discussions about the pedagogical role that museums—as public institutions could and should play in working towards the SDG—and how museums could organise exhibitions and educational programmes that promote and empower sustainable development teaching, learning and action, will probably define museum policy and museum education research for some time to come. This gives rise to several pedagogical and theoretical challenges, particularly in the context of primary stage of education, on how to incorporate an element of interest into the educational programmes and exhibitions at museums.

In order to ensure their survival in the twenty-first century and also to make themselves socially relevant in the community in which they exist, museums are evolving and reinventing themselves.

This has led to the emergence of “post-museum”. Marstine clearly defines post-museum and its role: “The post-museum clearly articulates its agendas, strategies, and decision-making processes and continually re-evaluates them in a way that acknowledges the politics of representation; the work of museum staff is never naturalised] but seen as contributing to these agendas. The post-museum actively seeks to share power with the communities it serves, including source communities. It recognises that visitors are not passive consumers, and gets to know its constituencies” (Marstine, 2006, p.19).

Throughout history, museums have been considered as educational institutions that offer valuable knowledge and experiences by showcasing a range of art, cultural artifacts, and natural objects in their collections (Hein, 1998). If a child’s visit to the museum sparks their curiosity and creativity, it would be considered “meaningful” in the context of young children.

THE SCHOOLS’ PERSPECTIVE

Yet, while school management authorities as well as parents and guardians agree in principle that museums are fundamentally educational institutions, not much enthusiasm is shown regarding museum visits. The diffidence to actively involve the local museum in their students’ learning experience seems inexplicable.

A short questionnaire administered by one of the researchers to the teachers and principals of 25 schools in Haryana, Punjab and Delhi revealed some of the apprehensions and challenges regarding museum visits by young children. Some reasons cited are—

other visitors in the museum. For a long time, museums have been seen as places where exhibitions serve an educational purpose, and where objects are regarded as conveying their own meaning, without any external interpretation needed. This idea known as “object-based epistemology”

S.No.	Challenges	Percentage
1.	Paperwork related to museum visit	50%
2.	Limited availability of financial resources	25%
3.	Risk factor in external (out-of-school) activities	20%
4.	Arranging transportation for museum visits	20%
5.	Pressure on teachers to complete the textbook and workbook	40%
6.	Assessment and testing schedule	35%

Some parents and guardians also expressed the apprehension that the museum is ‘a place where no noise is permitted and no running around,’ and so it would be ‘boring’ for young learners; and therefore a visit to a more ‘enjoyable’ venue (instead of a museum) ought to be planned by the school.

THE TRANSFORMATIVE MUSEUM

Pedagogical considerations about museum education over the years have centred on a variety of topics, including which information and what kinds of experiences are deemed valuable (Tinning, 2017). It is true that museum authorities do insist on discipline, but that is to ensure fuller concentration on the objects on display, and also in consideration of

has been widely accepted (Bedford, 2014). However, there has been a recent change in perspective, as museums are now being seen more as sources of aesthetic experiences, rather than simply as educational tools. According to Bedford (2014, 16–17), an aesthetic approach has the power to capture, and stimulate the most profound form of personal meaning-making, and can potentially lead to transformation.

Over the past few years, the relationship between formal education and museum education has experienced a transformation. Trofanenko and Segall (2014) coined the phrase ‘pedagogical ambiguity’ to capture the changing interaction between educators and museums, as well as the diverse viewpoints on the role that museums play in education. This term highlights

the growing collaboration between these institutions. The current pedagogical function of museums differs significantly from their traditional role in the past. In the present day, it is commonplace for museums to have a dedicated educational department that delivers educational programmes and museum-based learning experiences for schools.

However, it may be mentioned that the present-day museums are far more interactive than the 'traditional' ones and employ an engaging approach to visitors. Open-air museums comprising of large objects preserved as artifacts emerged in the twentieth century; the current generation also has the opportunity to 'visit virtually' museums in other countries as well, thanks to the Internet. Museums are also going beyond their in-house operations, and taking initiative in preserving the intangible heritage of a country like folklore, folk tales, folk dances, folk songs, etc.

Thus, a new form of museology has emerged since the 1980s as a result of mounting criticisms of museums. This is a result of the collaboration between scholarly communities and source communities whose cultures were on display in museums around the world. According to Peter Vergo, this new form of museology emerged as a result of "widespread dissatisfaction with the old museology, both within and outside the museum profession" (Vergo, 2006, p. 3).

The recommended approach to teaching and learning is rooted in the Didaktik tradition of Scandinavia and Germany. Didaktik, which is

predominantly discussed in formal education, refers to the purpose of education, as well as the relationship between teaching and learning in the context of the specific subject matter being taught. The Didaktik tradition thus views the teaching and learning scenario as a connection between teacher, student, and subject matter (Klafki, 1995). If applied to museums, the didactic scenario of museums can be viewed as an interaction between three key elements—the museum educator, who chooses and arranges appropriate exhibition content and facilitates encounters with exhibits; the museum visitors who attend the sessions to learn and experience; and the chosen exhibition content, which is located within the pedagogical environment of the museum. Therefore, the meanings that can be drawn, the knowledge that can be learned, and the experiences that can be had during a museum visit are all influenced by the decisions made by exhibition curators regarding what to include or exclude, and how objects are arranged and presented. The central idea of transactional pedagogy within the context of museum education is to explore how exhibitions and their objects can be transformed through the interactions between students and exhibitions, as opposed to their inherent qualities. Therefore, the process of drawing meaning is not solely determined by the exhibition or the visitor, but rather, it is the interaction between the exhibition, the visitor and the

context that facilitates the creation of meaning.

This may be better understood through an analogy with literature. In a literary text, meaning is neither located in the text nor in the reader, but it is constituted in transactions between the reader and the text. That is how multiple readings may offer different interpretations, even to the same reader. When transferred to the museum, this idea implies that museum visitors' experiences are considered to emerge in transactions between situational circumstances, such as museum visitors' previous experiences, the displayed objects, the curated museum space and the social and educational situation.

MUSEUMS FOR YOUNG LEARNERS

India has more than 1,000 museums. Acquainting children with museums early in life introduces the past to them in a tangible form and broadens their knowledge of the world. However, it is important to take young learners to those museums or sections of museum that would help kindle their interest. A few such museums are suggested below—

Heritage Transport Museum (Bilaspur Chowk), Taoru, Gurgaon, Haryana

Most children are interested in automobiles, and would certainly enjoy a visit to this museum which traces the journey of transportation in India. The Automobile Gallery

showcases the evolution of the Indian car industry. On display are over 75 vintage and classic cars.

Chennai Rail Museum in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

The museum has outdoor heritage exhibits. Some of the trains and locomotives in the collection are more than a century old, with a sizeable collection of steam engines from the time of the British Raj. It also has vintage coaches such as from Ooty trains, which were endemic on Indian railways. Toy-train rides are available, which are cherished by children.

The State Tribal Museum, Bhopal

The MP Tribal Museum, inaugurated in 2013, is unlike a typical museum where the exhibits are displayed with some contextual information. Instead, it is stunningly beautiful, creatively showcasing the region's tribal art and culture. The lifestyle, folklore, social customs and rituals of the seven indigenous tribes of Madhya Pradesh—the *Bhils*, *Gonds*, *Bharias*, *Korku*, *Sahariya*, *Baiga* and *Kol* are displayed in the museum. The different types of houses, characteristic of each tribe, made with materials such as mud, bamboo and stones, have been replicated. Visitors can enter the model houses and have a look at the exhibits there. The exterior of the houses are decorated with colourful murals and paintings. The whole museum is a visual delight and provides a good insight into tribal



life, their basic tools and weapons, musical instruments and method of preservation of foodgrains.

Vechaar: The Utensils Museum

Vechaar is a private museum in Ahmedabad and is perhaps the only museum of its kind in the world, displaying a collection of utensils

from olden times. The visitor would be spellbound by the vast range of utensils from different historical periods. The collection is artistically presented on either side of a path in the hut-like museum, taking one's mind back to the olden days when people did not have modern facilities. Utensils and kitchen tools for each task may be seen—for cutting food items to size, heating food on an open fire or on a stove, grinding, mixing, and frying. Children may be encouraged to notice that using the right tool makes all the difference to cooking. Hopefully, it would also help young minds imbibe the fact that everyday items like utensils are also significant, and as worthy of preservation as the weapons and armour of royalty.



Figure 2: Vechaar Museum, Ahmedabad

Image Credit: Anushka Sharma, Wikimedia Commons.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Veechar_museum,_ahmedabad.jpg

Sulabh International Toilet Museum, Sulabh Bhawan, Palam Dabri Road, New Delhi

The toilet museum is often listed as one of India's quirkiest places to visit. With toilets and defecation modules representing around 50 countries, a visit through the museum takes the visitors through three sections of ancient, medieval and modern styles of toilets. Although children may giggle or feel squeamish at first, it is important for them to know that health and sanitation are inseparable.

There are innumerable such examples of museums—the *Bharat Lok Kala Mandal* in Udaipur, Rajasthan and *Gurusaday Museum* in Kolkata are two museums which work on preserving the rural folk culture; *National Science Centre*, Delhi which aims to engage and educate visitors through thematic exhibitions, interactive educational activities and outreach programmes; *Fisheries Museum Andaman & Nicobar*, located in Port Blair, which exhibits species of marine life endemic to the islands along with an aquarium that houses various collections of fishes, corals and shells.

MUSEUM VISITS—NOT A BORING EXPERIENCE

Most teachers and parents would agree that exploring and knowing about the cultural heritage of a nation is important for all of us. Hence, visiting a museum with children is a step in this direction. In order to make it a truly interesting and stimulating

experience, and also to ease the child's introduction to art and history, the following steps may prove useful—

A Pre-visit Talk

Children are much more perceptive than we give them credit for. A short interaction with children on the new environment that they would experience will surely pay dividends. For, it would be an environment which is very different from anything else they generally experience in their day-to-day lives. Explain to them that they would be in large rooms filled with objects which are not to be touched, but only looked at. For young children it may be difficult at first to accept the idea that the beautiful and exciting things in front of their eyes cannot be touched.

Tell children that, just as they thoroughly examine a new toy, there would be other visitors completely engrossed in a peaceful appreciation of the exhibited works of art or historical artifacts and so, they should be silent.

Emphasise that there would be ropes or other restraining boundaries, barring their access to certain areas within the museum or the gallery, which they must not jump over or crawl under.

Safety Measures

Safety here refers both to the well-being of the children and the security of the exhibits. Although art and history museums and galleries are relatively safe environments with CCTV systems

and security guards, teachers or accompanying adults need to reinforce some simple security concepts.

Emphasise that the exhibits cannot be touched, dislodged or pushed in any way. Mention the fact that statues and armours are very heavy and they may injure themselves if they tamper with large objects. Explain that there may be a crowd, so you all (teachers and students) need to be together and children cannot simply go explore alone.

Fun Time

- Incorporate play elements in relation to the objects. For example, encourage them to look carefully at the object and list everything that they see.
- If there are common elements, ask children to see how many they can find. (For example, how many paintings with horses can you find?)
- Choose a small detail in one of the paintings and ask children if they can locate it. (For example, A bee near a large bouquet of flowers in a vase).

For the Accompanying Adult

Teachers or guardians who accompany young children to museums need to be prepared too. A few small but significant points—

- Begin with museums and galleries which are local or lesser known with few visitors wherever possible.

- Carry the letter of admission, tickets and receipts for payment made, if any, in a closed file, (no papers flying about accidentally) with a back-up on the mobile phone.
- Find out where the toilets are. This is the most crucial question you need to ask while you are buying your ticket. To avoid the stress of having to rush through seemingly endless rooms in a desperate search for the toilets, find out: Is it a long way from the exhibition rooms to the toilets? Are there toilets on each floor? Generally, young children say that they need to use the toilet only at the very last minute. (Also carry a pack of wet wipes or tissue paper.)
- Some museums organise special kid-friendly events, so the school could utilise such opportunities.
- Putting up flyers, and pictures of the exhibits on the school notice board would also help create interest.
- The school may also consider inviting a local musician, sculptor or folk singer to the classroom. Let children interact with them, touch their musical instrument, learn about their traditional attire and so on.

For the Museum Staff

Visiting museums is an opportunity to expose children to the new worlds in a rich and educational environment

through exhibits. Be it a children's museum, an art gallery or a science museum, the objective is showcasing history. Children form a sizeable chunk of museum visitors; moreover, children generally visit the museum in large groups. Hence, museum staff too, may be pre-oriented to cater to young learners, be sensitive to their needs, and above all, to answer questions patiently. This may be all the more essential for exhibits that children may not encounter in day-to-day life. Yet, a chance remark or snippet of information may open up a new and exciting vista for the child. For instance, if a learner comes across an exhibit dealing with historical figures or events involving aviation; and curiosity to know more about the subject leads him or her to want to learn more about aviation (which may or may not be a topic in the textbook), then the museum experience could well be a significant initial influence on future life choices.

Present-day museums have a strong commitment to education and are closely tied to schools in terms of their pedagogical approach. Thus, the contemporary educational commitment of museums can be characterised as having a close pedagogical relation to schools. As a result, there is a need for more pedagogical reflection on museum education as well as for critical dialogues regarding the relationship

between the educational approaches of museums and formal education. Additionally, this transition necessitates a greater attention to the ways that learning happens in museums (Trofanenko, 2014).

CONCLUSION

By conceptualising museum educational practices as a transactional space, we can increase our understanding of the conditions that frame the museum as a public space in which education is negotiated, tested and explored.

A theoretical framework explaining the relation between exhibition, visitor and the educational situation could inform pedagogical discussions about how to incorporate education into museums. Museums must move beyond the walls of tradition to stay relevant and maintain sustainability. Moreover, they must impact their visitors in a meaningful and memorable way. Museums must explore partnerships and collaborative opportunities that allow them to not only invite local student participation, but also to provide the means by which to achieve that involvement. Museums are not merely a collection of lifeless objects in a building; they are narratives that tell yesterday's stories for tomorrow's generations. Remaining at 'status quo' is no longer an option for even the smallest museum today.

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