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Early Childhood Education: Historical Learning-processes in Museums

Performative play stations for preschool children in the permanent exhibit *German History in Images and Testimonies* at the German Historical Museum

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Abstract

This article presents a cooperative project of the Department of Education and Communication of the German Historical Museum (DHM) in Berlin and the Social Studies Education Department at the University of Siegen. This study gives input on pedagogical approaches that combine early childhood education in museums with performative play-based learning processes. It describes an education-oriented museum project that has been running since the winter semester of 2012/13. It focuses on preschool children, who often have their own collections of things (Duncker, Kremling 2010) and have gained experience with the activity of collecting, which makes the collections and archives of the DHM accessible to them on that level.

Since kindergarten and preschool groups from different districts of Berlin are invited to participate, very heterogeneous groups will visit the German Historical Museum. They get to know the museum exhibits and explore historical transformations in contrast to their own world. In order to make this possible, it is necessary to open and develop the exhibition designed for adults, *German History in Images and Testimonies*, for 5-year-old preschool children. Outcomes of the research are reflected in the context of the German subject *Sachunterricht*, a term that will be referred to throughout the presentation of this research. *Sachunterricht* involves basic primary school lessons in social sciences and promotes multi-perspective views in which the natural performative learning tendencies of children are incorporated. This study gives input on pedagogical approaches that combine early childhood education in museums with performative play-based learning processes. Many museums in Germany are tailored to specific groups of visitors, which reflects structural exclusion mechanisms within educational institutions. Often exhibitions are primarily designed for adults with a specific educational background. For example, people with an immigrant background are oftentimes not easily reached. Children as visitors also indeed suffer unless they prove to be compatible with the staging of the museum. However, if they disturb anything or draw attention to themselves, they may be chastised or parents or educators may be implored to better guard them. Even the few museums that explicitly

address families and children in their exhibitions or visiting programs are sometimes not sufficiently adjusted to include contact zones. On the other hand, many presumably family-friendly social spaces oftentimes provide limited aspects of learning material. The following attempts to develop an education-oriented museum project aimed at preschool children; a learning environment based on preschool children within a large, permanent exhibition. Following Gerold Scholz (2010), who postulates that children from preschool to primary school age empathize and learn through relationships, it can be seen how relationships between groups of preschoolers and things in museum exhibitions may arise. Concrete objects with sensory properties are required, as preschool children can draw nearer to their meanings through artistic expression and play (Isenberg, Jalongo 2000). In primary education, especially the *Sachunterricht* subject-teaching, explorative, childlike approaches to relationships are negotiated in performative learning form (Pech, Rauterberg 2007). The performative learning framework (Pech, Rauterberg 2008) emphasizes pedagogical entry points, so to say. This approach considers childish impulses and questions as a starting point of learning and relates to research in childhood educational sciences (Heinzel 2010). This approach places less emphasis on skills and knowledge, and more emphasis on the reflexive support of children grappling with ideas individually. The first design considerations for the tour were created in reference to developments in the theory of early education and teaching of *Sachunterricht*, without an extensive empirical evaluation. Early on, small groups of children were included to act as a corrective measure against stations selected by adults. Through the children's participation it was discovered what objects were of most interest, and these expressions of interest from children became the starting point for the play stations at selected locations in the exhibition. Spatial and budget-related arguments will further determine the selection. The final stations will be built in several exhibition areas, particularly in areas that provide refuges for groups of children. They will provide contact zones where reconstructed objects on display provide physical-sensual experiences, and where mimetic approaches, in the form of imitation games with personal expression and performance, are encouraged.

The desired connection between biographical self-learning and subject-learning requires extensive cooperation between institutions of preschool and later primary education. In the preschool level, childlike performative learning is automatic and exploratory processes with sensual experiences are implicit. Such relevant experience-based learning can also be valuably utilized at the primary level. However, institutional transitions between preschool or kindergarten and primary school not linear; they require coping strategies and transition phases. Exactly how successful transitions can be created and stages made for the acquisition of procedural knowledge are important future research issues. Further study on how children deal with collected objects, especially in a museum setting, can expand knowledge regarding these transitional times. To illustrate this short transcripts taken from empirical research are presented: these depict the experience-based engagement of children in relation to objects from the collection of the DHM.

This first transcript was created at the museum during the visit of two preschool children to a photo montage in which people (actors), wearing articles of clothing from the Germanic-Roman times, are optically present or not in an image of a vast forest depending on the observer's point of view.

Child 1: The pictures are changing there.
 I: And can you recognise something in there?
 Child 1: Yeahhh.
 I: What, then?
 Child 1: Three people. One, two, three. And three there, too. And...
 Child 2: 'Cause there are three knights there, too.
 I: Why do you think that?
 Child 2: Because they have spears and helmets and shields and that's how a soldier is.
 I: Exactly. And when you move backwards, what happens then?
 Child 1: Then it changes.
 I: mhm
 Child 1: Then it's just a forest.
 (17.11.2013)

In the sequence above, the children react to questions posed by the interviewer, leading to slowly lengthening answers. The two preschoolers approach the exhibition subject with some prior knowledge of knights in mind and connect these with movements. Then the optical tricks of the photomontage can be tested simultaneously with the children's movement games. The visiting children figure out that they can change the optical impressions individually, which captures and holds their attention. The interactive photomontage stimulates movement elements that contribute to the accessibility of the exhibit. The collective activities of children are also considered in the context of museum collections and archives. Discussion groups at the stations and a final interview offer the visiting groups of children an opportunity to exchange thoughts and share experiences. The five selected stations allow playful, body-related forms of appropriation, such as dressing up or feeling something to judge its weight. Body-related experiences, such as dexterity exercises, are combined with the teaching of historical content. This offers implicit learning opportunities for the children through uncommented-upon sensory experiences.

Children's body-related impulses in relevant learning processes have been studied in early childhood educational Studies (Nentwig-Gesemann u.a. 2011a) which describe children's experimentations and approximations, even if they are unsuccessful, as key stages in the pertinent acquisition of knowledge and problem-solving skills. Environmental experiences generate mimetic self-education processes (Gebauer/Wulf 1992, Schäfer 2005-Nentwig Gesemann u.a. 2011a). The mimetic capacity is understood as the ability to physically and

sensually acquire meaning. The subjective perceptions are stored as internal images and converted into physical productions. This process is not a simple imitation, but rather involves subjective, imaginative, expression and interpretation. Mimetic processes are a necessary part of the informally occurring conditions of development and learning. They feature a work practice, a creative activity, through which children take an active approach to their relationship with their environment. Concepts of early education science are, as shown in the following empirical evidence, helpful for furthering the discussion concerning the didactics of *Sachunterricht*. The historical perspective of the learning material gives children an impression of social change, different actors and stakeholders throughout time. Preschool and primary school children experience historical changes not purely as rational arguments, but also in full body-related concepts in which emotional interests are addressed. In the following each of the five selected activities in the studied contact zones: hunting, music-making, locomotion, living and dressing, is examined. Relevant movements or activities for the children are connected with each of these activities. The basis for these play stations is that performative learning of children is tied to property relationships, interpretations and replications. Things are interpreted in the context of already known object worlds. Possible meanings are tested in the context of subjective experience and performative self-portraits (Wagner, 2012, Stauber 2004, 2006). For example, contact zones in museums establish a connection to everyday interpretations of things and encourage automatic testing situations, a concept developed by Marie Louise Pratt (1995). She presents the thesis that, in the contact zones, visitors may glimpse into other worlds or past lives, as she said: "... a contact zone is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect." (Pratt, 1992, p.7). Reflections on contact zones in museums thus expand upon approaches to primary school education and fundamentally question existing didactic concepts for non-formal education initiatives. To allow contact zones with museum objects at chosen stations, work arrangements must be kept flexible to allow for physical movement within the space. This gives children room to playfully deal with objects in the exhibition. The objects in the exhibition then invite young visitors to grapple with meaning in a performative sense. The resulting moments of play can be picked up and incorporated into fruitful pedagogic educational processes.

Five transcripts will now be presented and discussed. These transcripts follow from the previous ten visits with small groups of preschool children in the exhibition. These five sequences – hunting, music-making, locomotion, living and dressing – were chosen because they visibly illustrate the physical, sensual and relational experiences of preschool children in historical learning processes. First, a visual impression of the station hunting, which is a presentation of a hunting scene located in a niche accessible from several sides, between two display cases. The transcript sequence from 01.02.2013 shows that animals are intensively perceived in the imagery of the preschool children.

Child1: Horse.

I: Mhm (in agreement), horse.
 Child1: And a dog.
 I: Exactly. And who sits on top?
 Child2: A person.
 I: And what is he doing on the horse?
 Child2: He's riding.
 Child2: And another dog...there are two dogs there.
 (01.02.2013)

In this interview sequence, the two children bring up animals as a topic, and, although they initially respond to the interviewer, they do not follow the line of questions regarding the human actors in the picture. Rather, they focus their interest back to the existing animal imagery. This interest in the animal representations is noted by the museum's educational program. The future station will include a small stage with a folding puppet theatre, where children can play with stick figures. The figures represent animals in hunting situations and refer to the hunting activity that is present in historical representations in the exhibition room. In addition to the animal figures from historic hunting scenes, more figures will provide contrasting information on contemporary forms of hunting. The platform can be used by groups of children so that children with stick figures as actors may re-enact a hunting scene and other children can be spectators.

A second transcript sequence, from 17.11.2012, comes from the music station. This is an exhibition room with numerous items from turn of the century interiors. It is demarcated from the rest of the exhibition in a protected space in which many groups of children feel comfortable and happy, often remaining for a relatively long time, usually more than 10 minutes.

Child: Here is a shelf and here (...)
 I: Do we want to sit here for a minute and look quietly?
 Child: That's a funny-looking guitar.
 I: What's funny-looking about the guitar?
 Child: That it has a horn like this. And a mouth like this.
 I: A mouth? Where do you see a mouth? Ah, underneath.
 Child: And two eyes, too. [...] And here some big ears. And then a horn right here.
 I: And what else can you find in the room?
 Child: /Mhm/ old chairs and sofas and (...).
 I: What are you pointing to? At what is hanging there?
 Child: A lamp, a picture. But where is the picture?
 Child: And there's a statue, too, that you can see [...] And jewel boxes, too [...] and a song book. And an eagle in the picture.
 (17.11.2013)

Again in this example, a child introduces his own theme, namely regarding the lyre or lyra. The child can possibly classify the musical instrument as a guitar, but is taken aback by its unusual shape. The lyre additionally attracts attention because it resembles a human face. The child deals with comparisons between the mouth, ears and formative elements of the lyre. The museum exhibit sets objects in relation to known forms. In the station a replica lyre is to be used to support this process. The children will have the opportunity to sit in the room and make sounds, or play a chord. The group of children can soak up in the context of the music activity within a museum space. The intention of the curators to recreate historical parlor music situations is concretely experienced by the children.

The third station, locomotion, is located at the showcases of a bicycle and a car prototype. The large exhibit is unsettling because it is one of the first prototypes of the car, and thus still bears many characteristics of a carriage or a buggy. This station was not originally planned but has been included due to children's obvious interest in automobiles.

Child: That's a real car?

I: Yeah, but it looks a bit funny, doesn't it? Does it look like your car?

Child: I don't have a car.

I: Ok, but like the cars here on the streets?

Child: Can I please drive in the buggy?

I: But it isn't a buggy. Look inside closely.

Child: Can I please drive in the car?

(17.11.2012)

A child initiates the sequence of 17.11.2012 by asking whether the exhibit is a real car. The conversation pivots around, however, as the object is initially seen as a carriage. Presumably the child is somewhat familiar with excursions using this means of transportation. Finally, the object is identified as a car again. The dialogue reflects the uncertainty of the child when suddenly confronted by a cross between two known objects. This uncertainty is an incentive to look at the object more closely and to investigate more. This station will build on the interest of preschool children to do explorative research and find out which cars' or coaches' technical details can be understood. The locomotion station is further deepened by a movement game with a fantasy journey that has been developed in which modes of travel, be it a carriage, car or bike, can be picked up. This game sequence will be formulated, reviewed and possibly expanded in the accompanying video ethnographic study in more detail. An example model of a former Berlin tenement is the fourth station, which is associated with the living activity.



Photo1: Model of Kastanienallee Nr. 12 in Berlin, Prenzlauer Berg built in 1900, Rainer Bartsch, Berlin 1982 (Photo Lena Lürken, Universität Siegen)

The model was produced in 1982 for the then Museum of German History of the GDR, whose collection the DHM has taken on after reunification. In the showcase simple enamel tableware is displayed. In dealing with the showcase model on 17.11.2012 the following dialogue arose:

Child1: But we do have some that look similar to these.

(a bit later in front of the model)

Child1: The house here doesn't look so good. They look like they're from the past, these houses. That house (pointing to a house in the back) looks old fashioned.

Child1: And up there are some stairs, mini mini stairs, like Playmo stairs or actually Lego stairs.

Child2: I don't see any Playmo stairs.

Child1: That's how Lego stairs go, like doop doop doop [...]

I: There's the living room.

Child1: Where you can play piano.

I: Oh, no piano would fit in there.

I: Look, they all live together in the little kitchen. There are no children's rooms.

Child1: And no living room.

(17.11.2012)

The children form parameters of reference by comparing the model to their own living environment as well as to their toys. They contrast their experiences at the museum with well-known activities and everyday situations. One can note the differences and similarities

they recognize. The model of a Berlin apartment building appears in some sense to them as unreal as a toy dolls house. It is questionable whether the housing situation depicted in photos of a working class family is experienced as a historical replica. In the planned station, concrete objects from the display cases are tangible, which could provoke exploration and more concretely depict the living situations. The objects are presented in a touching box, which enables the preschool children to join the world of the Berlin tenement with their own physical experiences.

Finally, the guided experience of the exhibit is concluded by the display of children's clothing from more affluent middle-class families of the imperial period. This is made clear by the clothes in the display cases and on the basis of several paintings in which the clothing was worn by children from families who could not afford these fashions.

I: Know what, we're going now to another picture where we can see children who are wearing these exact suits. We have to go a little bit back; come with me.

Child2: Yeah, he has the same thing as us two.

I: Exactly. And know what – we have these clothes with us.and can you imagine wearing such clothing all day?

Child1: Nooo. No. So weird.

I: Do you want to go right up to the picture?

Child1: But I'm not one of them – they have those white pants and gummy boots.

(01.02.2013)

The children are attracted to the clothing from the imperial period on display and aware that it relates to sailors' clothes. They view hanging paintings from the imperial period. This leads to comparisons with the illustrated children, who the visiting children mimic in poses. Only the active process of dealing with body-related learning (the wearing of these clothes) puts an otherwise rather unnoticed and uninteresting picture in the focus of attention. Preschool children tend to be attentive observers, and clearly note the differences and similarities between themselves and the children, around the same age, depicted in the painting. Now each of the five selected activities in the studied contact zones were examined: hunting, music-making, locomotion, living and dressing. It can be seen how the specific movements or activity associated with each engage the children in performative leaning, and each unique task indicates the end of a station and the transition to the next. Visiting preschool children are encouraged to explore the relationships between the stations and the exhibition rooms. Fundamentally, the objects of exhibition are not prematurely named or described, but rather are first to be *experienced* by the children. The stations provide accessible and educational contact zones that are relate-able to a child's current world.

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