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Children Museum Experience: Exploratory Study of Potential of Museum Visits in Achieving Learning Goals of Irish ECEC Curriculum Framework Aistear

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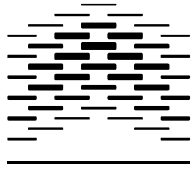
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OSLO AND AKERSHUS
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
OF APPLIED SCIENCES



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Children Museum Experience:

***Exploratory Study of Potential of Museum Visits in Achieving Learning
Goals of Irish ECEC Curriculum Framework Aistear***

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Erasmus Mundus joint degree “Master in Early Childhood Education and Care”.

15 August 2012

International Master of Early Childhood Education and Care.
Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences,
Dublin Institute of Technology and University of Malta.



Declaration

I hereby certify that the material which is submitted in this thesis towards the award of the Masters in Early Childhood Education and Care is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any academic assessment other than part-fulfilment of the award named above.

Signature of candidate:

.....

Date

Acknowledgments

This thesis is a final work to complete the requirements of the two years programme of International Master in Early Childhood Education and Care (IMEC), offered in cooperation between Oslo University College (HiOA, Norway), Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT, Ireland), and University of Malta (UoM, Malta) and coordinated under Erasmus Mundus scheme. I am very grateful to the three hosting institutions for the warm welcome into their academic communities and their continuous support throughout all four semesters of the studies.

This thesis is a result of my long lasting passion for museums and interest in taking Early Education beyond the walls of ECEC settings. IMEC gave me the opportunity to travel and get inspiration from different places and various approaches to education. However, I would not be able to complete this project without all the amazing people who supported me on the way to the finish line.

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the potential of museum visits in achieving learning goals of Early Childhood Education and Care as listed in the Irish ECEC Curriculum Framework Aistear. Data obtained through interviewing professionals of both ECEC and museum education sector has been compared and confronted with the literature available. The study focuses on three main areas.

Firstly, it looks at the learning goals listed in Aistear and attempts to link them with the potential outcomes of children's museum visits. The interviewees were asked to recognise and comment on learning experience that ECEC groups participate in during an outing to a museum. The study shows that a multitude of the Aistear learning goals can be obtained within a single trip to a museum.

Secondly, opportunities and challenges of children's museum visits in Ireland are being looked at. The participants of the study were sharing their experience, both positive and discouraging, as well as they were attempting to objectively analyse current state of relations between the two sectors. Stereotypical thinking about the facilities available and museums' age appropriateness proved to be present among some of the respondents. It has been concluded that more efficient communication need to be established between ECEC settings and Irish museums.

Finally, the study suggests after the interviewees several ways of increasing the quantity and improving the quality of ECEC museum visits. Recommendations for facilitating cooperation were given by representatives of both professions. They include both structural and policy changes as well as improvement of communication channels that may lead to a better understanding of the needs of young children across the two sectors.

The result of this study is intended to serve as a foundation for further research in the area of ECEC museum education in Ireland.

Key terms

Museum education; children in museums; ECEC curriculum; *Aistear*; Irish ECEC; Irish museums.

Glossary

Aistear – A word from Irish meaning ‘journey’. In this study used as a shorter form of the *Irish Early Childhood Curriculum Framework - Aistear*.

Children – The study looks at the Early Childhood Education and Care as described in Aistear document and therefore the age group referred to as ‘children’ is 0-6 unless indicated differently.

Children’s museum visits – In this study those are organised visits of ECEC groups to museums unless indicated to be family or individual visits.

Curriculum – As the study examines Irish context this refers to the *Early Childhood Curriculum Framework – Aistear* unless in plural (‘curricula’) when meaning other sets of aims and goals of education.

ECEC – Early Childhood Education and Care. In Ireland known also as ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) which researcher would deliberately not use to stress the importance of Education over Care in Early Childhood.

ECEC practitioner – In this study person employed by ECEC setting to work with children.

Learning goals – A part of the Irish *Early Childhood Curriculum Framework – Aistear*; namely, a list of 96 skills, features and knowledge that according to Aistear children should master before starting primary school.

Museum – In this study a historical museum which can be described as the one preserving and displaying objects from the past and providing historical education for its visitors. For practical reasons art museums and galleries, science and experiment centres as well as other less common types of museums are not a subject of this research.

Museum educator – A person employed by a museum to assure the quality of museum’s educational offer, develop programmes and organise events for visitors.

Museum visitor – In this study every person visiting museum in order to learn regardless their sex, age and socio-cultural background.

Children Museum Experience:

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Introduction

1.1. Context

Contemporary Western societies are often described as learning societies (Falk, Dierking, & Adams, 2007). The idea of lifelong learning is nowadays familiar to most of the Europeans. It is becoming widely accepted, that much learning occurs outside schools and universities. We are learning long before starting formal education, in ECEC settings as well as by interacting with people, objects and natural phenomena. Moreover, learning occurs also later, when adults participate in culture, experience new things or get to know new concepts. Learning in contemporary society is both a part of their professional life and leisure.

Modern museums, once being places of preservation and display of ancient or exotic objects and welcoming mostly scholars who were able to understand hectic exhibitions and could share their expertise on the objects displayed, nowadays welcome visitors of all ages and social backgrounds (Hein, 2007). Also an approach to museum education has recently shifted from being simply concerned with transmitting knowledge to more visitor-led meaning-making (Falk et al., 2007; Hein, 2007).

Museum education starts as early as with babies who are being taken on museum visits by their parents or carers and, therefore, learn the patterns of museum behaviour. Toddlers may confidently explore some parts of modern museums and their learning would already have both socio-cultural and intellectual dimensions. Young children, despite being only a small group among the whole range of museum visitors (Henderson & Atencio, 2007), are very important indeed. They are most probably going to be future museum goers and lifelong learners on their own. Museums of today, becoming free-choice learning settings (Falk et al., 2007), should ensure their choice as places of learning for tomorrow.

To bring children to a museum or not is a decision of adults and, therefore, it should be acknowledged that it is parents, carers, teachers and minders who should be best informed about the benefits and opportunities for children's museum visits (Talboys, 2010). Having a better knowledge on both advantages and challenges of accessing museums with children their choice would be made confidently and deliberately.

Developing new policy documents, curricula and guidelines seems to be an excellent opportunity for supporting the idea of children's museum visits. Contemporary Ireland

has faced huge economic development that led to social changes which opened up space for new activities and initiatives. Fast growing interest in ECEC resulted in development of the new Irish ECEC Curriculum Framework Aistear that is aimed to cover all children from their birth until they turn six years (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, & Neuman, 2010).

The philosophy behind Aistear recognises children as competent and curious learners at the beginning of their lifelong learning journey. The main themes of Aistear as well as the specific learning goals cover a wide range of child's activities and competences obtained during early years. Aistear promotes learning through play and encourages providing children with rich and varied experience. Therefore, the interdisciplinary and inspiring environment of a museum (Talboys, 2011) has the potential to become part of the learning journey of Irish children.

1.2. Rationale

There is a growing worldwide interest in museum education. Providing positive museum experiences to young children has been recognised as a part of museums' lifelong learning policy (Falk et al., 2007; Talboys, 2010). Also the new Irish ECEC Curriculum Framework Aistear is being described as a first step of children in their lifelong learning journey (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2004). Therefore the two should potentially work together to ensure quality education in early years.

Children's museum visits are developing into an important area of the current museum educational policy (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999; Talboys, 2011). Since museums are looking for new ways to attract wider range of visitors and play more significant role in communities it has been observed that providing access for children helps to reach others (Talboys, 2011). Little children are not coming to museums alone. They are accompanied by adults; usually their parents, grandparents, relatives or teachers and minders who are responsible for organising their outings. Therefore, by encouraging more young children's visits to museums the overall number and array of museum visitors increase.

The choice of historical museums for a subject of this study was deliberate. Due to their interdisciplinary character historical museums attract a wide range of visitors and give them opportunity to look at and interact with a variety of objects. Contemporary

museums depart from the tradition of glass cases, non-touching policy and strict visiting rules (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007; Talboys, 2011). Visitors today are often given a chance to explore and discover museum at their own pace and according to individual tastes and interests. A museum visit is not only an occasion to get specific knowledge on the subject of display but also an aesthetic experience and social interaction (Walsh-Piper, 1994). All of the above can be particularly beneficial for children in their early years.

Introduction of the new ECEC curriculum framework Aistear in Ireland is an important step towards quality in Early Education (Oberhuemer et al., 2010). This fast growing sector needs guidelines and principles to help prepare children for the challenges of further education and life in a changing society. The learning goals of Aistear can be obtained in numerous ways while the diversity of children's experience is mostly limited to the number and quality of opportunities provided by adults. Encouraging museum visits among ECEC practitioners and young children's carers may be one of the steps towards better quality of Irish ECEC.

The curriculum is being addressed to a wide range of users and it aims to cover various activities that young children can be involved in. It promotes out of classroom education and contact with real objects instead of transmitting abstract knowledge. Museums as such, however, have not been directly mentioned in Aistear. Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that a museum visits enable young children to experience learning in a new and potentially exciting environment that would undoubtedly enrich their early education.

1.3. Objectives

The main aim of this study is to explore the possibility of meeting curricular learning goals of the Irish ECEC curriculum framework Aistear through children's museum visits. To get a better insight into existing relation between early education and museum education the researcher interviews museum educators, Aistear tutor and ECEC practitioners. Several questions are being asked to investigate what experts and practitioners find important in museum visits organised for young children. The interviews lead the researcher to better understanding of what encourages and what prevents children's museum visits in Ireland.

The researcher aims to show how visiting a museum can be justified by the Irish ECEC curriculum framework Aistear. The analysis of the document together with the literature

review helped to construct an interview tool to elicit more information from practitioners working both in ECEC and Irish museums. Therefore a potential contribution of museum visits to children's learning experience in context of the ECEC curriculum framework has been looked at.

Being the first one of its kind in Ireland the study aims to contribute to future development of the area of museum education for young learners. The researcher hopes it would be of benefit both for museum educators and ECEC practitioners.

1.4. Research questions

To get an insight into the current situation of museum education for young children the researcher interviewed both museum educators and ECEC professionals as well as analysed literature available on children's museum visits. Therefore, the research questions this study aims to answer require multilateral approach.

First of all, a general knowledge on what children's museum visits look like is needed. Both interviews with professionals and literature review should help the researcher to find out what the learning outcomes of such visits are.

Secondly, the relationship of museum education outcomes to the Irish ECEC curriculum framework Aistear was looked at. The main question this study is aiming to answer is: which of the children's museum visit learning outcomes correspond to the learning goals as listed in Aistear?

Interviewing practitioners of both professions gave the researcher an opportunity to look at challenges and possibilities of cooperation between sectors. The two questions that need to be answered are: How can we describe Irish museums readiness to receive ECEC groups? and How can we describe Irish ECEC sector readiness to visit museums?

Finally, together with interviewed practitioners the researcher is looking for recommendations for both museums and ECEC sector regarding enhancing future development of children's museum visits in Ireland.

1.5. Thesis plan

The thesis consists of five chapters. A glossary with key terms is provided to clarify the meaning in which they are being used throughout the study.

The first chapter presents the rationale, objectives and research questions of the study. The second chapter is a literature review. The third chapter explains the methodology of the research. It also discusses ethical issues and mentions limitations of the study. The fourth chapter presents the findings of the research. Finally, the discussion of the findings and further recommendations can be found in the fifth chapter. The last chapter of the thesis consists of the concluding remarks.

Sample letters to the participants of the study, sample consent form, sets of interview questions and a table presenting selected extracts of interview transcripts are also attached to the thesis as appendixes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Introduction

This chapter explores the literature available on the topics most relevant for this study. First of all, ECEC in Ireland and Irish new curriculum framework Aistear are described. Secondly, museum education and research done on children's museum visits is considered. Finally, understanding of children's museum experience is approached through theories that may help linking the two above.

2.2. Aistear and Ireland

Irish ECEC

Early Childhood Education and Care sector in Ireland is in most of its parts relatively new and fast growing due to demands of increased quantity in the last two decades (Oberhuemer et al., 2010). Children aged 0-3 would most often be sent to private or voluntary/community services while 4-year-olds can either go to a preschool, of which one year is free for all children over 3,5 years since 2010, or proceed to junior infant class in primary school (Oberhuemer et al., 2010). The diversity of provision in Ireland results in disparity in quality and multiplicity of curricula and approaches.

Although the statutory age for starting primary school in Ireland is 6 most of the children start attending pre-primary in the infant classes as early as at the age of 4 (Oberhuemer et al., 2010). The integrated Primary School Curriculum (1999) outlines the goals of education in junior and senior infant classes (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2004). Meanwhile a range of different guidelines have been used by individual ECEC settings and organisations of childcare providers; for example, Steiner or Montessori curricula and the Curricular Guidelines for Good Practice for the Early Start Preschool Intervention Project (1998) (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2004; OECD Directorate for Education & Ireland, 2004).

After development of the White Paper in 1999 a considerable amount of attention and efforts have been put into developing of the new ECEC policies. The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was launched in 2002 to research and co-ordinate ECEC development (Duignan & Walsh, 2004; Oberhuemer et al., 2010). One of the main aims of the CECDE was to enhance the quality of ECEC in Ireland (Duignan & Walsh, 2004). To this end the CECDE, in consultation with early childhood

educators nationally developed the National Quality Framework - Siolta which was published in 2006 (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006; Oberhuemer et al., 2010).

In 2004 the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) published a consultative document for development of a national framework for early learning that would cover all children in the pre-school age; namely, from their birth until they turn 6 (Oberhuemer et al., 2010). It has been designed to complement rather than to replace the existing curricula and guidelines (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2004). The new Irish ECEC Curriculum Framework Aistear was finally published in 2009.

Aistear content

Aistear views children as capable young learners and acknowledges children's rights (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2004). It was developed to serve all children regardless of the type of ECEC setting they are attending or the character of childcare they are getting. Therefore, Aistear aims at providing universal guidelines for teachers and ECEC practitioners working in institutions and responsible for groups of children as well as parents and carers taking care of a child at home.

The curriculum framework consists of four elements. 'Principles and Themes' set and explain the goals of the curriculum. The 'Guidelines for Good Practice' aims to meet the need of further explanation and provides examples of Aistear usage as requested by practitioners during consultation process. 'User Guide' answers frequently asked questions and can be regarded as the Aistear manual. Finally, 'Key Messages from the Research Papers' provides a summary and references to the studies used for developing the philosophy of the curriculum framework.

Aistear acknowledges the importance of early childhood as a time of tremendous learning opportunity and of early learning as the foundation of lifelong learning (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2004).

Early learning through discovery and adventure will promote mastery, understanding and achievement in a fun way. This learning should arise from children's own interests and experiences, and take account of their specific strengths and needs. It must also take place within the context of the child's

culture and language(s) (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2004, p. 13).

Aistear is a play-based curriculum and suggests child's agency in discovering of the world. It prioritises active learning and hands-on experience over traditional adult-directed teaching. The curriculum framework recognises also the role of others in child's social development. Moreover, it addresses issues of equality and diversity in context of social diversity in contemporary Ireland. All of the above are reflected in the list of 12 Aistear principles.

Children's learning and development have been presented in Aistear by using four main themes, each of them consisting of four aims. The aims, that describe positive outcomes in child's development, are then divided into six more specific learning goals each. The learning goals list learning dispositions, skills and knowledge to be obtained in partnership with an adult. The four themes of Aistear; namely, 'Well-being', 'Identity and Belonging', 'Communicating' and 'Exploring and Thinking' are all interwoven through the aims and the learning goals that may actually well correspond with more than one theme.

Like some other contemporary ECEC curricula from around the world; for example: Swedish or New Zealand's, Aistear is based on similar model stating learning goals for children completing their early education (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2004). This solution gives a considerable freedom of choice of means and methods used by ECEC providers. The learning goals, that are to be looked at in this study, have been developed through extensive consultation process and are designed to suit children of different ages from the range of 0 to 6 and of different abilities (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2004).

Aistear implementation

Although Aistear since its publication in 2009 has been distributed among ECEC providers and information sessions have been held nationwide the number of ECEC settings officially claiming to use the new curriculum framework is far from satisfactory. There is no legal obligation for adapting the governmental project as well as no special benefits can be provided for those using Aistear.

2.3. Museums

Museums in Ireland

Ireland has a long tradition of museums having its roots in the times when it was under British rulers. The first museums have their origins in collections gathered by scientists, historians and anthropologists. They were mainly accessible for members of scientific societies (Bourke, 2011).

The end of 19th Century saw a rapid development of both privately owned and national museums. Also at that time the issues of the educational role of museums were raised (Bourke, 2011). The process of development slowed down after Ireland gained its independence in 1922 and a period of cultural isolation started to last for several decades until well after the Second World War (Bourke, 2002).

There were attempts to make the National Museum accessible for children as early as in 1930's. A note would have been sent to school principals inviting both elementary and secondary school students. At that time teachers were supposed to guide the school visit with occasional support of the museum staff (Bourke, 2011). However, that invitation would have been intended for older students and it can be assumed that children under 6 were not frequent guests of those institutions.

Specialist education staff have been employed in Irish museums since 1970's (Bourke, 2002, 2011). For contemporary Irish museums education is one of their main tasks ('A policy framework for the Irish museum sector', 2003). The development of the educational offer for lifelong learning has been supported by both the Heritage Council and the Irish Museum Association (Bourke, 2002).

Museum education

The educational role of the museum has been highlighted by the researchers specialising in museum studies (Durbin, 1996; Falk & Dierking, 2000; Hooper-Greenhill, 1999; Talboys, 2010). There have been a number of interdisciplinary research studies conducted to explore the experience of museum visitors of different ages and backgrounds (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Hooper-Greenhill, 1999, 2007; Talboys, 2010). While some of the studies were pointing to the importance of children's museum visits for the development of further interest in museums among adults other research has inquired into what makes children's experience so important and memorable (Csikszentmihalyi, 1995; Ingle, 1999).

A multitude of learning theories and a number of pedagogical frameworks have been consulted to conclude that there are many reasons why museum can be a powerful learning environment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1995; Henderson & Atencio, 2007).

First of all contemporary museums are seen as places of play and learning (Henderson & Atencio, 2007). Although children usually go to museum with adults they are often being given a reasonable freedom to explore exhibitions and play in the areas designated for young visitors. Many of the modern exhibitions would contain games, jigsaw puzzles, movable objects and things to touch for younger children to make their visits both meaningful and enjoyable (Ingle, 1999; Witcomb, 2007). Moreover, numerous museums provide space for children's discoveries. Those would mainly include dress-ups, mechanical activities and objects to touch and feel that can be also used for pretend play (Witcomb, 2007).

Secondly, the role of intrinsic motivation has been recognised (Csikszentmihalyi, 1995; Henderson & Atencio, 2007). Museum visitors are learning because they find exhibitions interesting and the whole experience of the visit intrinsically rewarding. This can be opposed to classroom-based learning when children are more likely to feel motivated by grades and competition within peer group (Henderson & Atencio, 2007). Moreover, Csikszentmihalyi (1995) suggests that a museum visitors can experience the flow when challenging themselves or learning new skills during museum visits. Simple curiosity when arising to deeper interest and being reinforced by sensual, intellectual or emotional involvement may lead to overcoming intellectual challenges or gaining new skills. Those, if intrinsically rewarding enough, will lead to the flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1995).

Thirdly, the social aspect of museum education has been highlighted (Henderson & Atencio, 2007). School visits when carefully prepared and organised by teachers successfully supplement and enrich curricula (Henderson & Atencio, 2007; Ingle, 1999). Moreover, many contemporary exhibitions provide opportunities for learning social history by relating to visitors' personal experience and engaging in dialogue (Witcomb, 2007). This may be the way to draw children's attention to local heritage, cultural diversity and family history (Carr, Clarkin-Phillips, Beer, Thomas, & Waitai, 2012).

Then, the possibility of bodily engagement with the exhibits and the museum setting has been found important for early learning (Ingle, 1999; Witcomb, 2007). Opportunities of kinetic experiences, mechanical interactivities, touching and dressing up leave an open end for learning. Children are let to explore and experience rather than asked to give an answer or show what they have learned (Witcomb, 2007).

Finally, novelty and challenge that museum represents has been accepted as factors that both attract children's attention and make them think of revisiting museums in the future (Ingle, 1999). Museum exhibitions have to power of capturing visitors' attention despite lack of knowledge or familiarity with objects and symbols presented. Encountering both physical and intellectual challenges by children is what makes them learn, enjoy and remember their museum visits (Henderson & Atencio, 2007).

Young children and museums

There has been some research done on young children's museum visits. A study by Anderson, Piscitelli and Weier (2002) looked at children's museum experience in four different American museums. Researchers found out that, although children participating in the research were visiting museums in groups and therefore programmes of their visits were very alike, each child was able to recall different memories from the museums. Children's recall depended on their knowledge, experience and socio-cultural background. The research proved that children were more likely to remember large-scale objects and those that they were able to touch, manipulate or interact with. Moreover, young visitors would remember stories that they had heard in the museum. It was important, however, that children could relate the stories to some familiar experience or their own cultural context. Finally, for some children the previous museum visit would be a point of reference and a basis for building up learning experience (Anderson et al., 2002).

Since 2011 a very interesting experiment is taking place in New Zealand where a kindergarten is actually built into the National Museum (Clarkin-Phillips, Carr, Thomas, Waitai, & Beer, 2011). Researchers have been invited into the Te Papa Museum since the establishment of this unusual ECEC setting (Clarkin-Phillips et al., 2011). The study by Carr and others (2012) explores the role of the boundary objects in meaning-making practices in the museum. The boundary objects would be things that physically crossed the boundary between the kindergarten and the museum or stories

that functioned in both environments. Therefore, the boundary objects were aimed to connect and remind rather than divide and create borders. The results proved that learning occurred through meaning-making practices. Children's learning was supported and assisted by boundary objects that by their constant presence became a part of the kindergarten's learning environment. Moreover, the example of Te Papa Museum shows how children's museum visits can be linked to the strands of ECEC curriculum (Carr et al., 2012).

Another interesting research project has been conducted in an art museum. Children were empowered to take the role of museum guides for the duration of their visit (Weier, 2004). That study proved that even young learners are capable of making meaning of the objects gathered in a museum. The children were very likely to respond to familiar subjects, like family and community life or pre-school curricula, and make up stories (Jeffers, 1999; Weier, 2004). Moreover, most of the participating children were able to follow the cultural pattern of a typical museum visit despite very little prior experience in museum going. The study showed that young children were capable to guide adults through exhibitions and that they clearly understood the purpose of the museum visit (Weier, 2004).

2.4. Children museum experience

What is the young children's museum experience? Although some museums may seem unconsciously unwelcoming for children, young learners proved to be competent and curious museum visitors (Anderson et al., 2002; Carr et al., 2012; Weier, 2004). One of the advantages that children may have over adult visitors is the lack of feeling that they need to be experts in the field to spontaneously respond and interpret museum exhibitions (Weier, 2004). Modern museums should respond to children's open-minded approach by creating friendly space and inspiring learning opportunities for young visitors.

The study by Anderson et al. (2002) proposed for analysis of children's museum experience a theoretical framework based on constructivism theories. Five aspects of learning have been listed by the researchers. The socio-cultural theories refer to children's learning during museum visits. The cognitive perspectives acknowledge the importance of play. The aesthetic theories looked at in the study focus on both perception through different senses and expression through art and movement. Finally,

the last two perspectives, collaborative and motivational, encompass social development and its impact on children's learning. The following sections of the literature review loosely refer to and elaborate on the division presented in the Anderson's et al. (2002) study.

Learning

Children's learning as well as museum education draws from multitude of learning theories. Contemporary museums are gradually leaving the concept of behaviourism based on provision of simple stimuli. The more complex, contextualised model has been sought for as the exhibitions based on simple exposition and explanation proved to be ineffective as learning environments (Falk et al., 2007; Hein, 2007; Henderson & Atencio, 2007).

Instead, it is now believed that children construct their knowledge from adding to their prior experience (Falk et al., 2007; Hein, 2007; Henderson & Atencio, 2007). Therefore, young museum visitors are being oftentimes exposed to objects and symbols of some familiarity (Witcomb, 2007). That together with explanation, story or interesting label helps children construct their knowledge on the origin and significance of exhibits.

With the development of post-modern learning theories the focus of museum education has shifted towards collaboration and mediation in learning (Falk et al., 2007; Witcomb, 2007). Children are believed to learn not alone but with the constant communication of the peer group, community and the impact of their socio-cultural background. Children's learning is, therefore, regarded as a result of their diverse social experiences (Henderson & Atencio, 2007).

Museums, unlike traditional schools, value also the role of intrinsic motivation in learning and encourage self-regulated exploration of exhibitions (Csikszentmihalyi, 1995; Henderson & Atencio, 2007).

Considering the above it has been concluded that children's play being a physical, social and interactive experience should be the most influential instrument of museum education (Henderson & Atencio, 2007).

Playing

Play is an important aspect linking ECEC settings' practice and curricula with inquiry-based interactive museum exhibitions. Playing individually or in a group gives children

opportunity to explore, manipulate and describe phenomena, share their experience with others. It is through play that children construct their knowledge in their early years (Henderson & Atencio, 2007).

Museum visits give children opportunities to play with and surrounded with objects (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). This type of play is considered to be the most natural and therefore beneficial for children's learning (Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008). It is through handling objects and examining them how they make sense of the world, develop their fine and gross motor skills and get to compare things.

Imaginative play give children another opportunity to make meaning of the surrounding world (van Oers, 2003). Museums provide visitors with inspiring stories, interesting objects and interiors and meaningful interactions that stimulate children's imagination.

Also in the play children learn to negotiate with others. They develop their communication and interpretation skills that lead to consistent social abilities development (Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; van Oers, 2003).

Social development

Giving children an opportunity to leave the well known environment of the ECEC setting and letting them explore a museum and experience participation in a public space may be regarded as a part of empowering policy. Contemporary children are not only cared for but also encouraged to acknowledge their own rights, value and importance for the society (Jans, 2004).

The development of a child's social abilities occurs during a museum visit through negotiating and collaborating with others. As museums are open to public children need to learn how to behave in a public space so that their rights are respected as well as those of other visitors (Jans, 2004).

Cultural policy

Young children visiting museums not only get to know facts, play with objects and learn about proper behaviour in a public institution but are also intensely exposed to carefully selected part of human cultural heritage (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007).

Not only art galleries but most of museums may be considered important settings for aesthetic experience. The design of the buildings and interiors as well as the way objects

are being displayed at an exhibition create unique atmosphere that stimulates children's learning (Olds, 1990).

Moreover, museums have proved to be very effective centres of multicultural education (Suina, 1990). Since they were traditionally displaying objects acquired from other cultures modern museums are nowadays in a position of exhibiting, interpreting and advocating for diversity. As a result they give young children unique opportunities to not only read about but also watch (by presenting video materials), observe, touch and sometimes even participate in customs of different cultures (Suina, 1990). Multi-sensory approach and discovery learning create a huge potential for museums to develop better understanding and positive attitudes towards multicultural education.

3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

Qualitative approach has been used for data collection and analysis in this study (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Several interviews were conducted with Irish ECEC professionals and museum educators in attempt to get some insight into opportunities, challenges and possibilities of ECEC museum visits in Ireland and particularly in Dublin where the research took place. Analysis of the data consisted of comparison of the voices of two groups of stakeholders and closer examination of *Aistear* to show possibilities of meeting curricular learning goals by organising ECEC museum visits.

3.2. Research questions and hypothesis

The research questions guiding this study are:

- How do children experience museum visits in Ireland?
- What are opportunities and challenges that ECEC museum visits bring?
- Which of the museum visit learning outcomes correspond to the learning goals as listed in *Aistear*?
- How can we describe museums readiness to receive ECEC groups?
- How can we describe ECEC sector readiness to visit museums?

It is hypothesised that, although museum education for ECEC in Ireland is a relatively new and still developing sector, the new ECEC Curriculum Framework *Aistear* may help in facilitating this process by showing the link between learning goals listed and expected learning outcomes of museum visits.

3.3. Method

The research was aimed at getting insight into professionals' opinion on potential of ECEC museum visits. Therefore a semi-structured one-to-one interview was the primary method of data collection (Denscombe, 2007). Having one interviewee at a time, probing and creating conversational atmosphere helped the researcher to elicit facts, opinions and interesting examples or stories relating to the subject of the interview.

3.4. Interviews

Altogether seven interviews were conducted with professionals from both museums and ECEC sector. The sets of questions [Appendixes E and F] for both groups were only slightly different and each consisted of five themes (three to four questions each).

The first set of questions was designed to elicit relevant background information about participant's qualifications and experience. The second was different for the museums and ECEC settings and inquired about interviewees experience with ECEC museum visits. The third one enquired about ECEC museum visits, their outcomes and challenges. The following set of questions was focused on Aistear and a list of selected Aistear learning goals was provided as a prompt [Appendix G], especially for those not yet familiar with the document. Finally the last set of questions asked professionals for recommendations for museums and ECEC sector.

All the interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. The average length of each interview would be approximately 30 minutes. A sample selection of fragments of interview transcripts has been attached to this study in form of a table [Appendix H].

3.5. Participants

A non-probability sampling has been used in the study. The participants were selected as an purposive sample (Denscombe, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Only one person from each participating institution has been interviewed to avoid repetitions in the data collected.

The ECEC professionals were carefully selected. It was important for the researcher that they would be familiar with Aistear. Therefore, their number was limited due to the fact that not many ECEC settings in Dublin were implementing Aistear at the time of data collection for this study. Either experienced ECEC practitioners or members of management team were answering the interview questions. An attempt to interview a number of Aistear tutors as a separate group of respondents could not be accomplished and therefore the only Aistear Tutor interviewed has been put in the data analysis among ECEC professionals and handled as such despite slightly different set of questions being asked.

The number of museum educators interviewed was also limited due to the fewness and organisational structure of museums in Dublin. Also some of the museums contacted

prior to data collection replied that they either do not provide for groups under school age or do not have dedicated museum education officers.

Altogether seven professionals have been interviewed. Their qualifications and experience varied and has been presented in a Table 1. In case of ECEC sector most of them have been working in their professions for more than 20 years and had a considerable experience in the field. In their jobs they were dealing with children from 3 months in crèches to 12 year olds in After-school Clubs. For this study, however, we focused mainly on children of preschool age, namely from 3 to 6 years old.

Museum educators interviewed were also experienced in their field. Their professional responsibilities included providing educational offer for all age groups of museum visitors and therefore young children would be only part of them. Nevertheless, all respondents had some experience in handling young learners' museum visits. That together with their personal interest to take part in the research makes them possibly a group of experts in ECEC museum education in Ireland.

Interviewee	Profession	Qualifications and experience
A	Museum Education Assistant	B.A. in Textiles and Embroidery Postgraduate diploma in Community Arts & Education 5 years
B	Aistear Tutor & ECEC practitioner	B.Sc. in Psychology and Biology Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE, UK based) M.Ed. in Early Childhood Education 2,5 years as Aistear Tutor
C	Museum Education Officer	B.A. in History and English M.A. in Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies 2 years in museums, 2 months in the current position
D	Crèche Manager	Certificate in Preschool Care Supervision in Childcare Module

		Starting your own Business Module Certificate in Supervision and Management 22 years, 15 years in the current crèche
E	Nursery Manager	Nursery Nurse qualification Management qualification Over 20 years, about 6 years in the current centre
F	Museum Education and Outreach Officer	M.A. in History Arts Management Course 18 years, 2,5-3 years in the current position
G	ECEC practitioner	Nursery Nurse diploma Nursery Management diploma Certificate in Childcare Over 20 years, nearly 17 years in the current setting

Table 1.

3.6. Time frame

A relatively short period of data collection was preceded by much longer preparation and an exchange of e-mails between stakeholders or their managers and the researcher. In case of both ECEC settings and museums their websites had been studied prior to interviews. Moreover, the researcher visited each of the museums participating in the study and enquired about the learning opportunities for young children.

All the interviews were conducted over a period of a month in late May and early June 2012. The researcher was meeting interviewees in their working environment.

3.7. Limitations

Specific limitations have been recognised throughout research process. First of all, the number of participants available and matching the criteria of the purposive sampling was lower than initially expected. To get a bigger sample either the sampling criteria or the research geographical area could have been changed.

Secondly, the terminology in some of the interview questions proved to implicate specific answers. The researcher noticed that words as ‘benefit’ or ‘challenge’ could have been replaced by other neutral words lacking positive or negative connotations.

Finally, the selection and presentation of the Aistear learning goals as a prompt could have been improved. For those of the interviewees who were familiar with the document the abridged list was a limitation affecting the quality of their answer to the question. On the other hand, for participants encountering Aistear for the first time the list might have not been meaningful enough. Providing full or shortened list of learning goals on participant’s request could have been a solution to this limitation.

3.8. Ethical considerations

Having in mind ethical guidelines the researcher tried to be objective both during data collection and data analysis process (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Critical analysis and self-reflection were considered primary tools for achieving objectivity. Moreover, well-being and dignity of participants was protected at all times.

Information letters were sent both to participants and their supervisors prior to data collection [Appendixes A, B and C]. Therefore, they were given a clear explanation of the nature of the study and were informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. A set of interview questions [Appendix E or F] was attached to each letter in order to share more information about the study with stakeholders and let interviewees prepare to feel more confident during actual interview. All participants were asked for their consent in a written form [Appendix D].

The interviewees were assured that their names will not be included in the study. Addresses and names of the institutions remained hidden and letters were used to conceal participants’ identity.

4. Findings

4.1. Introduction

The findings presented in this chapter derive from the analysis and interpretation of the data acquired through the qualitative research method as described. Professionals from two professions all working in different settings were interviewed about their experiences and opinions regarding ECEC museum visits and the possibility of meeting Aistear learning goals by visiting museums with young children. The views of ECEC practitioners (ECEC settings' managers, practitioners and Aistear Tutor) as well as museum educators (education officers and assistant) interviewed for this study are presented hereunder.

4.2. ECEC professionals opinion

ECEC museum visits experience

Interviewees shared their own experience with taking groups of children from the ECEC settings on museum visits. All respondents had known or heard about the possibilities of museum visits for young children. Those who had never done a visit mentioned considering museum visits as options for outings in the past or expressed their interest in doing that in the future.

However, the professionals who recalled taking children to museums were willing to share information on and stories from those visits. The experience mentioned included mostly Irish museums placed in Dublin. The Natural History Museum would be the first choice for those of the ECEC settings that visit museums regularly: *'The Natural History museum was the first one, the most obvious for us, for children, for their interest.'* [D]; *'It seems to be the one that holds their interest the most.'* [D]; *'(...) we've found the Natural History Museum is a lot more suitable [as opposed to National Gallery] for our group because their interest is in animals and whatever else.'* [G]. Moreover, one of the interviewees mentioned visiting art museums. The National Gallery impressed children with the grandness and size while Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) turned out to have very welcoming, child-friendly policy and beautiful grounds where a group can have a picnic after a visit.

ECEC professionals would rather choose to go to a museum they know themselves. Some of the interviewees had not heard about relatively newly established or upgraded

Irish museums as Collins Barracks, Dublinia or National Print Museum. On the other hand, one respondent recalled her own childhood museum experience from the National Museum.

As none of the respondents had any official communication with museums or received any information from those institutions they were claiming that every museum visit was organised through their own efforts: *'It is just something we organise ourselves.'* [D]. That was often considered as a major oversight in museums' publicity: *'And yet what are they doing to promote that? There are a lot of art places in town, in Dublin maybe, not so much art museums, where they would promote as 'come and do this', as very child friendly. But museums, even the word 'museum', when you think of it as an adult makes you sound 'ok, it's a place where we're going to see old artefacts etc.'* [D]; *'We have never got any flyers or posters or anything that would say, you know, 'come and see us', 'come and see what we have to offer'.* [E].

Interviewees also mentioned UK museums as examples of welcoming, child-friendly and safe learning environments. Grand-looking old buildings would have been successfully adapted to provide for groups of young children. They were prised, as opposed to Irish museums, for both having dedicated programmes or hands-on activities and providing support and encouragement for teachers.

Challenges

ECEC professionals pointed to several practicalities that were challenging when planning museum visits. While some of those could be blamed on museums there are also many rules and regulations for ECEC settings that were making museum visits difficult.

The shortage of museum staff ready to facilitate ECEC visits has been noticed: *'In Ireland the challenge is really in getting the trip organised with a very welcoming education officer. Somebody who understands the need of very young children, who is willing to kind of lead us and point out, kind of focus our attention on relevant parts of the museum.'* [B]; *'And sometimes if you are lucky you may get a tourist guide (...), ideally the guide would be geared to the age group, so that they [guides] can make it [the visit] interesting and they can make it short so that they will hold their [children's] interest and then communication come slow in between two (...)'* [G]. However, the

positive change over last few years has been observed as well and supported by examples of positive museum experiences.

What teachers were concerned about were also the facilities inside museum buildings. Preschool children *'actually need somewhere with smaller toilets and hand washing facilities'* [B]. Also places where they can have a snack or lunch and hang their coats were regarded to be important.

According to the interviewees the furniture and space arrangement should be safe and well-thought out: *'They need the displays quite low, at their level.'* [B]. The layout of the rooms should allow practitioners to see children at all times. A possibility of losing a child during a museum visit was mentioned and therefore children should wear labels with school name and telephone number at all times.

Since many Irish museums occupy old historic buildings the safety may be an issue: *'Other thing is just this feeling of building being terribly refurbished, so not 100% secure, feeling unsafe.'* [E]; *'Safety, you know, is high, high on the list so that ticking that box will make people more comfortable about visiting the venue.'* [E].

The strict rules of museums were seen as obstacle. One of the ECEC practitioners wished that museum staff could be more relaxed about young children being louder than other museum visitors. However, my respondents also praised the fact that children would learn to respect museum rules during a visit.

On the other hand, extended adult-child ratios were mentioned by two interviewees as an obstacle for organising museum visit while others said they would rather not have problems with finding parents/guardians ready to join the trip. ECEC professionals noticed that parents usually first need to be convinced to visiting museums but when they see the outcomes of such visits they are more likely to get involved or take children on a family visit to a museum.

Lack of the staff to cover bigger group of children would be of main concern: *'You can't just go with a small group. You should remember the rest of the crèche as well.'* [D]; *'Like to bring the whole large group would sometimes not be possible or to bring everybody in the group and then you are releasing staff.'* [G].

Regulations concerning risk assessment were mentioned by two interviewees. Entering public transport on the way there and later public space of the museum were regarded as potentially risky situations. As museums are free and open to general public children

should be supervised by adults at all times very carefully: *'And when we are looking at a trip to a museum we tend to look at times when we think it will be a little quieter.'* [D].

The costs of the visit can be a challenge for ECEC settings from outside Dublin. Although most museums are free the visits costs can be substantial: *'Yes, I say the cost even for services from outside of Dublin or outside the public transport, the cost of facilitating transport, whatever, is just too high.'* [G].

Finally, one of the interviewees admitted that the idea of ECEC museum visit might not be very common among ECEC practitioners: *'You know, the staff is not interested, you know, that doesn't mean that you don't have a good staff member, and they might not think that maybe children would like to do something like that.'* [D]; *'Maybe because it is not that forthcoming, it is not just there in front of your mind all of the time. In terms of looking at what would children like to do.'* [D].

Opportunities

Interviewees were pointing out several positive outcomes of ECEC museum visits. Those can be presented in three major groups: museum visits as learning opportunities, as outings and finally as life-changing events.

First of all, it has been noticed that museum visits have a potential of becoming interactive and tactile learning environments. Interviewees suggested that touching and playing with objects helps children get more interested in museum visit.

ECEC museum visit can either build up on the knowledge and interests of the children or prompt them to further investigate phenomena and things they have seen in a museum: *'(...) the children would really get an experience of being close to something very old, something from years ago, and maybe that would form lots of ideas and lots of extended learning.'* [E]; *'Even in early age you get the sense of history or you get a sense of art and even to see these grand buildings, like they've seen them in stories or in the pictures but to see these huge old-fashioned buildings with fancy grounds.'* [G].

Secondly, taking a group of little children on a trip to a museum is also a social skills learning opportunity on its own: *'It's life-skill as well. You are going out on a trip: you've got to be aware of the road, you've got to be aware of other people, aware of yourself, your own responsible.'* [D].

Thirdly, ECEC museum visits were described by professionals as *'fun experiences that are memorable'* [B] and that prompt children's imagination.

Children who have had a positive experience of a museum visit in their early years are believed to be more likely to revisit museums later on different occasions and also as adults with their own children: *'And you know, as you grow up you still have it in your head, it is still there, I can still go when I am bigger, you know, they are always going to be there.'* [G].

Aistear

The respondents of the study working in ECEC settings would be all familiar with Aistear. They have been either using the new curriculum framework in their settings as a whole or incorporate elements of it. The period of working with Aistear would vary from 18 months to couple of years, so back to the time when it was still under development.

The interviewees noticed that, although the Aistear is a new document, the core ideas and some elements of the curriculum would be very similar to the routines previously used in their settings: *'Although we would be consciously introducing elements of it would have been similar to the way we worked anyway.'* [G]. On the other hand, one of the respondents have found Aistear much more manageable than other curricula and providing practitioners with very useful resources. All the ECEC practitioners taking part in the study were very enthusiastic about Aistear: *'I think it's a wonderful tool, you know. It's everything that we have already done as practitioners but just have name on it now. So it is like re-motivating thing.'* [D].

ECEC practitioners recognised most of the selected learning goals provided as achievable during museum visits. They were also referring to all four themes of Aistear: *'It's everything. It is discovery, it is exploration, it is communication... It is all of the headings of Aistear.'* [D]; *'(...) with regards to well-being, identity and belonging, communication, exploring and thinking... It absolutely touches everything here.'* [E]; *'I suppose if you look through different elements then you will see how those different elements can be all met through museum visits.'* [G].

One of the interviewees noticed that although all the learning goals presented on the list provided could be met during museum visit they can also occur during other outings or

at an ECEC setting. Therefore, it may be required that ECEC practitioners get extra support to encourage them to take children on a museum visit.

4.3. Museum educators opinion

ECEC museum visits experience

Museum educators interviewed for this study confirmed that children under the age of six are among museums' audience. Young visitors would be mostly coming into museums with their families; nevertheless, some ECEC settings are also organising museum visits.

Although ECEC visits are appreciated and welcomed in museums, the respondents admitted that children under 6 may not be the priority target group for museum education. That is mainly because education officers and assistants are dealing with and providing for very diverse audiences: *'Within the museum it's every age group.'* [C]; *'I suppose the only problem with a museum is that they focus on everybody, not on everybody, but we get adults, families, schools...'* [A]

However overworked they may seem, museum educators acknowledged the need of providing education for every age group visiting museums. Also the fact that museums are receiving financial support from the state and are free to be visited by everyone brings the responsibility for addressing children's particular needs. Although the interviewees mentioned the challenge of admitting diverse age groups and the fact that they would not specifically invite or encourage ECEC settings to come, they also claimed that pre-schools and Montessori settings would inquire about possibilities of museum visits. Despite multiple challenges of a museum visit the ECEC groups would have been welcomed in a museum: *'For formal education under the age of 6 we never turn the group away.'* [F].

Interviewees confirmed that they are not part of any ECEC information network. Therefore, they usually do not send invitations and event calendars to preschools. One of the respondents complained about the multitude and dispersion of Irish ECEC networks and providers which makes it difficult for museums to get their information across. On the other hand, museum educators are not being informed about curricular changes in ECEC and need to search for those themselves.

Again, museum educators were comparing institutions where they worked with other Irish and UK based museums both regarding resources and financial possibilities for developing programmes for young visitors.

Challenges

Museum educators mentioned several challenges encountered both by ECEC practitioners visiting museums and themselves facilitating those visits. For teachers those would be mainly lack of familiarity with museums, structural constraints and logistics while museum education departments would mostly struggle with financial difficulties and shortage of staff.

All interviewees found the preparation and readiness of a teacher or ECEC practitioner crucial to successful museum visit. Confident ECEC group leader should be familiar with the layout of the museum: *'(...) if it is their first visit they may find it quite difficult to navigate, to find their way around because it is quite big and it is quite spread out.'* [A]; *'(...) taking children to the place you don't know is stressful. Obviously they will be nervous, I can imagine, about going to space they don't know very well.'* [A]. Structural constraints mentioned by the interviewees were also lack of lifts in museum buildings, limited space and glass cases placed too high for young children.

Organisation of any trip for ECEC group requires careful planning and coordinated efforts of several people. Not only museums need to be ready for young visitors but also ECEC practitioners are often constrained by safety regulations: *'For example getting enough parents, adults and transport. You know, all that logistical issue of bringing a group out. And obviously the museum need to provide some kind of services like for example place for them to put their coats and bags, you know, place for them to have their lunch.'* [A].

Although those ECEC practitioners who visit museums would usually do so on regular basis and with enthusiasm there was no data available on the reasons why other ECEC settings do not seek access to museums. According to the interviewees the common feeling that museums deliver expert knowledge and are highly scholarly institutions may prevent adults from taking children in: *'I think a lot of teachers would think to waiting for them to be a little bit older.'* [C]; *'I think traditionally museums are for older students.'* [F].

The interviewees, however, confirmed that not all the museums would be child-friendly: *'The older exhibitions are not that easy for interpretation but now with newer exhibitions the education has been involved in the planning of exhibitions.'* [A]; *'That said we also have exhibitions which have a general reading age of 10... 12 to 14 which would be standard. We don't have any exhibitions specifically targeted for under the age of 6.'* [F].

Financial constraints were pointed out as the main obstacle to develop new programmes and educational tools for young visitors. One of the interviewees complained that since the crisis struck Ireland the museum has not been able to hire any new education assistants. Not having enough staff would considerably affect the quality of facilitating ECEC museum visits.

Opportunities

Museum educators asked about readiness of museums to receive young visitors pointed out to several play and learning opportunities and facilities designed particularly for children. Moreover, they mentioned positive outcomes of museum visits and the importance of familiarising children with public institutions at the very early stage of their education.

As the importance of early learning has been recognised and many young children are being introduced to museums by their families and ECEC practitioners museums have been trying to facilitate their visits by providing designated play and learning areas: *'The facility area is always open. And that is specifically for children. It is probably more for like from five upwards but there is always let's say paper, well, basic things simply, there is crayons and colouring in for younger children.'* [A]. Interviewees claimed that those were popular among all age groups and oftentimes gave young children an opportunity to interact with older children and adults.

Asked about the most interesting things to do in museums for 0 to 6 age group respondents pointed out to tactile experience: *'I think the most interesting thing for children here is the fact that they are getting actually hands-on.'* [C]; *'Obviously multisensory things, so things you can catch or do or change so, you know, that they got to specifically do something in a museum, or the things that relate to their everyday life like, you know, clothes that we wear.'* [A]; *'So I suppose sometimes it is all about*

having little hands-on opportunity.' [F]. Interviewees were mentioning examples of things children enjoyed touching or manipulating with during visits in the museums.

Looking at objects would be another important activity occurring during every museum visit: *'It is just the potential of learning with objects and the potential of how to observe an object.'* [F]. Young visitors should be taught during their first museum visits how to examine objects at a display and what one can learn about the past from the artefacts gathered at exhibitions. Also one of the advantages mentioned by the respondent was the fact that a museum provides tools for more careful observation. An example of the Natural History museum was mentioned where animals can be looked at from a very short distance unlike in a zoo or in their natural environment.

Apart from above mentioned learning opportunities respondents could see social aspect of museum visits. Young children being taken to museums are leaving their familiar environment and encounter a public institution oftentimes for the first time in their life. They get an opportunity to interact with their peers and adults, they get a chance to build up their experience and gain confidence by discovering a new place: *'But then there is also the experience of actually being in a museum and being comfortable in it and helping the parents too... or grandparents or whoever is visiting with them to see around the museum.'* [A]. Respondents shared the stories of young children gaining confidence to speak in public and therefore getting a chance to be seen as more competent learners by their class teachers or children learning to cooperate with others to complete tasks that they were given during the visit.

Being concerned about Lifelong Learning museum educators could see the long term benefits of ECEC museum visits. In their work they have noticed how much more confident children become on their following visit to a museum. One of the interviewees mentioned her personal experience of visiting museums as a child. Positive experience in the childhood was claimed to be an encouragement to re-visit museum in the future: *'So I think that is important that will make them want to come back.'* [A].

Aistear

It could be assumed that museum educators would not know about the new Irish ECEC curriculum framework Aistear. However, one of the interviewees claimed that she had referred to Aistear while designing a programme for young children. Moreover, all respondents highlighted the fact that they try to follow all the changes in curricula in

Irish education. All these efforts are taken both for better quality of service and for teachers to know beforehand what the valid outcomes of a museum visit can be.

Looking at the list of selected Aistear learning goals museum educators realised that majority of them could be easily achieved during a museum visit. They were giving examples of activities that gave children learning experiences.

On the other hand, one of the respondents pointed out that the outcomes of a museum visit are highly dependent on planning, organisational skills of ECEC practitioners and competences of museum facilitators: *'So in one way the learning goals are limited but on the other hand, to be realistic, lots of whether a learning goal is achieved or not depends on how well the group plan their visit or how well the parent plan the visit, you know, whoever is bringing the child.'* [F]; *'If they did not get a tour they could pass through the museum in 15 minutes.'* [C]. Every single museum visit has the potential to become a valuable learning experience but whether children really benefit from it or not is in adults' hands.

Interviewees found Aistear both useful and inspiring: *'Reading it myself gave me lots of ideas.'* [A]. They also mentioned they would come back to it while planning activities for young visitors.

5. Discussion

5.1. Introduction

This chapter both further presents the findings of the study and discusses them referring to the literature available. The researcher attempts to analyse the data obtained during interviews, through comparing it with the content of the curriculum framework Aistear and the literature relevant to the topic of the study. Firstly, the major differences between opinions elicited from the two groups of interviewees is described and analysed. Secondly, the Aistear themes and learning goals are carefully examined in light of their potential utility for ECEC museum visits. Then the challenges and opportunities of ECEC museum visits are discussed and compared with the literature available and researcher's personal observations. Finally, the changes suggested by the interviewees are presented.

5.2. Museum educators vs. ECEC practitioners

Although many opinions presented by the interviewees of the study were similar, the responses differed considerably in several areas. The differences could be noticed both on the linguistic and semantic level. That may be due to the fact that higher education and professional qualifications obtained by the two groups of respondents were of dissimilar academic backgrounds. While all of the ECEC professionals would get their initial training in the discipline of Social Sciences that was not the case for museum educators who would rather upgrade their History/Arts education with management and community studies. All the overlapping knowledge presented by museum educators during the interviews could be therefore a result of personal interest and professional experience of the respondents.

The image of the child emerging from the response of both groups differed. While ECEC professionals were mostly describing children as independent and competent learners capable of making their own meaning of museum visits, museum educators were rather showing their concern about age appropriateness of exhibitions' content and necessity of adults' assistance and prompting during museum visit. This difference in approach may be justified by the fact that all ECEC professionals involved in the study were working with young children on everyday basis, being able to observe and study their learning and development. Moreover, they were familiar with, supporting and implementing Aistear and that must have caused deeper understanding of the principles

of the curriculum framework. At the same time for museum educators young children were only one age group out of the range of visitors' age groups and therefore they might have been comparing their learning abilities to those of more mature learners.

In terms of terminology used it was evident that ECEC professionals were considering the child as the central focus. It was not without a reason that they were using words like 'exploring', 'experiencing', 'communicating', 'interest'. At the same time museum educators tended to use vocabulary more connected to the provision of the educational service: 'activity', 'session', 'interaction', 'hands-on'. The difference observed may be a result of the dissimilarity of the tasks both groups of interviewees encounter in their professions. Although some of the ECEC professionals work now as managers of ECEC centres they all have had direct experience in childcare. That could not have been the case of the museum educators who worked at different positions within museums and heritage sites.

Different approach and interpretation of the interview questions resulted in response touching several layers of the problem. Generally speaking ECEC professionals tended to stress children's abilities and perceived museums as settings of free choice independent learning. Museum educators, on the contrary, were very much concerned about the quantity and quality of provision for young learners. The difference might have been a result of dissimilarities in understanding of the childhood. However, they might have as well been coming from the pragmatic thinking. Assuming that all the questions asked and the problem of ECEC museum visits were new to the respondents they sometimes seemed to think aloud and make plans for improvement in their professional settings while answering the interviewer.

5.3. Aistear learning goals

Although interviewees were provided only with a shortened list of selected Aistear learning goals they tended to comment on the curriculum framework more generally. The respondents often referred to Aistear themes or to the image of the child emerging from the document. The discussion around Aistear lead to conclusion that the learning goals as described in the framework can be achieved in early education in many different ways and museum visits can successfully become one of those. Extracts from the interviews have been attached to the thesis in form of a table [Appendix H]. The

respondents' justification of learning opportunities and their matching with selected Aistear learning goals is presented hereunder.

Well-being

The first out of four main Aistear themes focuses on children's psychological and physical well-being. It includes respect of the environment and other people, empowerment through healthy relationships and interactions as well as physical development that supports children in overcoming challenges they may encounter ('Aistear', 2009).

The ECEC professionals interviewed considered learning to respect and understand the rules of museum environment important skills to be obtained during visits. The image of a museum emerging from those remarks seems rather unfriendly for children. Strict rules are something that ECEC practitioners associate with museum visits. However, respondents show also understanding for the need of protecting precious artefacts from children's hands. Learning not to touch objects and to respect other visitors are widely considered to be skills children can learn in a traditional museum (Witcomb, 2007).

Museums being open to diverse audiences endeavour to meet the needs of all their visitors. Aesthetic layout and furniture comfortable for adults may not be practical for very young children. However, on the contrary to museum educators, ECEC professionals found the challenge of stretching to look at the objects placed in glass cases also an opportunity to develop gross motor skills. Both groups of respondents agreed that the outcome of a visit depends on activities organised in place. While walking around the museum and taking stairs support developing gross motor skills, arts and crafts workshops can help to develop fine motor skills of young visitors.

Acknowledging and understanding beliefs and values of others was also recognised as dependent on the type of museum visited. A museum education officer interviewed expressed her concern about the need of building up on the work of classroom teachers. On the contrary, ECEC professionals seemed more interested in museums inspiring and prompting children to ask important questions about diversity in the world.

Well-being is also regarded to be crucial for building self-confidence and making independent decisions ('Aistear', 2009). ECEC professionals noticed that taking children out of the familiar ECEC settings could be a first lesson on making choices and thinking independently. Children become more mature when they see and experience

new things and every museum visit is an opportunity for that. As opposed to ECEC professionals, who saw the possible benefits of exposing children to the new public environment, museum educators praised self-guided and discovery spaces installed in museums to enhance children's independent learning. Therefore, the researcher observed that the Aistear could be interpreted in different ways and the learning goals met by multiple means which museums provide both purposefully and unintentionally.

Identity and Belonging

The second of Aistear themes, Identity and Belonging, is about children recognising themselves as members of family and community. Building up self-esteem through respecting and listening to what children want to say is also a part of this theme ('Aistear', 2009).

Assuring children that they are important and cared for and helping them to 'see themselves and their interests reflected in the environment' ('Aistear', 2009) was considered by one of the respondents a 'high calling' [F]. Another museum educator, on the contrary, noticed that every space or device within a museum that had been designed especially for young visitors might make children feel valued and respected. Hands-on activities, toys, children's books, crayons and games that can be found in children's activity rooms are intended to stimulate learning, entertain and enhance another visit but they should also help children identify with the place (Weier, 2004).

The respondents found an outing itself being an important part of the process of building child's identity on different levels. That would be mostly identifying themselves as a part of the ECEC group, then a part of the local community by encountering people on the streets and in the public transport, and finally as a part of civic society by experiencing a visit to a public institution. ECEC practitioners recognised observing other people in a public space as an important lesson for young children.

Belonging to a wider community means also accepting the rules and behaving in an acceptable way. A museum visit is an opportunity to learn how to behave in a public institution. One of the museum educators interviewed wished children learn this appropriate behaviour as early as possible to avoid disturbing school visits at the later stage of their education.

Awareness of their strengths and abilities helps children develop broader range of interests. The respondents of the study considered museums to be inspiring. Moreover, contemporary museums put their efforts into making children's visits memorable and exciting experience. According to one of the interviewees knowledge about the benefits and enjoyment derived from exploring museums may also encourage parents to take their children on a family museum visit. As according to Aistear parents and guardians are children's primary educators (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2004) the role of ECEC visits as prompts to continue initiated learning experience within a family group should be recognised.

Communication

The third theme of Aistear is about different ways of communication, expressing themselves and sharing their experience and interests with others ('Aistear', 2009). As communication is a two way process children should also learn how to listen and interpret what others are telling them. The role of adults, importance of parents' or guardians' understanding and support has been highlighted throughout Aistear and is particularly relevant to this theme (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2004).

The respondents of the study noticed that a museum visit is an opportunity to observe how children can get their point across both non-verbally and verbally. First of all, it is child's face expression that shows how amazed they can be with the things encountered in a museum. Then they may start asking questions and making comments on objects of their interest. They also talk and explain things to each other that creates an atmosphere of informal peer learning environment. Finally, they listen to a tour guide and follow instructions of their teachers regarding museum behaviour and activities. All of the above can occur during a single museum visit that makes this type of outing highly valuable from the curricular point of view.

The three types of interactions have been mentioned in the interviews. The first one is an interaction with a museum guide or facilitator. ECEC practitioners noticed, however, that museum staff could be better prepared to deal with groups of young learners. The second one is a communication with parents, ECEC staff or other people who children are familiar to. That would include mostly asking and answering questions. Finally, the

peer interaction has been brought up as children should listen to each other and take turns in discussions.

Aistear recognises understanding and interpreting of various symbols as important skill to be obtained during early education ('Aistear', 2009). The interviewees pointed to several opportunities to learn and practice reading symbols during a museum visit. Those would be mainly following sequences of numbers, marked trails or directions in an exhibition, reading captions and recognising pictographs. Activity areas available in museums provide books and educational games for children. Moreover going outside the ECEC setting means encountering various symbols in public space.

The respondents agreed that children should find a museum visit an opportunity to share their feelings and thoughts. Again ECEC professionals perceive grandness of museum settings and intriguing arrangement of exhibition space a natural stimuli for interaction while museum educators focused on provision for young learners including guided tours, educational areas and activity trails for children.

A museum visit, like many other outings, gives children a chance to try out new things and become more confident in their abilities. Museum educators interviewed for the study noticed that novelty and risk taking are important elements of museum visits. For ECEC practitioners an outing itself seem to be challenging enough for children in many dimensions. Undoubtedly, museum visits give children a chance to encounter unfamiliar settings and build their confidence while gaining new skills and knowledge.

Exploring and Thinking

The last of the four Aistear themes is about children experiencing world around them and making sense of what they see in their environment. Learning through play is a principle the curriculum framework is referring to. Developing positive attitude towards learning has also been stressed in the description of the theme ('Aistear', 2009). Overlaps with the Communication and the Well-being themes are evident.

Both groups of interviewees recognised the opportunity in looking at or handling real objects, comparing them and examining. That can be opposed to being exposed to copies and models available at ECEC settings. In museum children see how grand or how miniature and detailed artefacts can be. That gives them a chance to compare and sort things. By playing with objects and games provided in educational area they can develop better sense of weight, length, capacity, age and value.

Museum visits, as well as other outings, enrich children's experience in their early years. ECEC professionals interviewed could see how multidimensional the experience can be. Children would be not only given free choice of what to learn but also develop skills indispensable in living as a part of wider community.

The respondents agreed that encouraging creativity can be among the positive outcomes of museum visits. That would be mostly by rising interest in arts and crafts that may inspire children to explore it further in the future. Both groups of respondents suggested that creative activities can take place during a museum visit but may be even more beneficial if follow up museum experience.

ECEC professionals noticed how important a museum visit is for child self-confidence. Children who are taken into museums and allowed to ask questions feel valued and respected. If they are listened to they should feel that their opinions are regarded important and taken seriously.

5.4. Opportunities

Apart from the learning opportunities corresponding directly to the Aistear learning goals presented above the interviewees pointed to several others that are briefly discussed hereunder. Although some of them may be easily related to the content of the framework they were also mentioned aside from discussing Aistear.

The most straight forward outcome of visiting a museum would be learning about past (Anderson et al., 2002). Although some museum educators were sceptical towards young children's abilities to connect and remember historical facts and events all the respondents were hoping that a museum visit should help children to make sense of past and learn about the continuity and change. Also getting to know origin of things was considered important. Therefore, in a museum young children should be given an opportunity to encounter familiar objects, things that have been changing throughout years but can be still recognised by young visitors. That would lead to building up knowledge on children's former experience (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999).

Both groups of respondents prized museums for giving young children opportunity to learn about real things. Artefacts gathered at exhibitions are usually not the copies or reproductions but objects with their own individual stories and qualities. Moreover, unlike in real life, their qualities are exposed, special features highlighted and the audience encouraged to look at them and reflect about them (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999).

Handling sessions were mentioned by the interviewees as excellent learning opportunities where children can use their senses to examine museum artefacts. They are also proven to be the most memorable for children (Ingle, 1999).

Nevertheless, learning with objects in most of the museums would still mean learning how to look at objects (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999; Walsh-Piper, 1994). This activity develops both imagination and analytical thinking. By following chronology or comparing objects children can learn about their origins and possible usage.

Participants of this study found museums inspiring for young children. A visit to a grand building housing a museum would stimulate imagination. Furthermore, learning about the objects gathered at exhibitions may fulfil an introductory role to inspire future interests and lead to further extensive learning (Ingle, 1999).

Another possible outcome of a museum visit is a language development. Children are very likely to learn new words, enrich the sentence structures used or became aware of foreign languages by encountering foreigners in a museum.

Finally, opportunities to dress up and engage in pretended play were mentioned by the participants of the study as particularly popular among young children visiting museums.

5.5. Challenges

The interviewees agreed that an ECEC museum visit may be challenging for both ECEC practitioners and museum educators. Apart from the worries about entering public space with a group of children and possible lack of facilities for large groups of under 6s three main areas of challenges were mentioned.

First of all, unlike most schools, ECEC settings very often do not separate children of different ages. That means taking for an outing groups of mixed ages and mixed abilities. Therefore, during a museum visit the level of understanding, ability to communicate and physical needs of the little children may differ considerably within a group.

Secondly, there is a common belief that museum exhibitions are not designed for children. Although true in most cases it does not change the fact that children very often do find their way around the museum and enjoy even without fully understanding the

content. However, the preconceived notion that children are too young for museums is a serious constrain for ECEC museum visits.

Finally, financial constraints struck both sectors during the crisis forcing them to reduce the services. That resulted in suspending renovations that were aimed to deal with physical constrains in museum buildings as well as reductions in employment leading to lack of staff in some museums. Also ECEC settings would be rather looking for the attractions within a walking distance than to organise an expensive bus trip. The advantage of the National Museums is that the entrance is free of charge but the guided tour may require paying a participant fee.

5.6. Recommendations

Both groups of respondents noticed a room for possible development of co-operation between Irish museums and ECEC settings. Suggested improvements were either well thought prior to the interview or appeared spontaneously while answering the questions. Therefore the recommendations appeared throughout all interviews and across different sets of questions. Surprisingly, they concerned similar issues in both groups interviewed.

Interviewees suggested that programmes for preschools only, apart from family and school programmes, should be developed. That would be an encouragement for ECEC practitioners to take children on museum visits. There are also, however, other ways of ensuring ECEC professionals that young children are welcome to come to museums. One of the museum educators interviewed mentioned self guided resources for teachers of under 6 that are being developed in a museum. Moreover, special Montessori activity sheets were already available in one of the museums represented in the study due to growing demand. Montessori groups would organise museum visits to provide children with a real life experience and challenge them with adult environment.

Another way of introducing ECEC professionals to museums could be an introductory talk or a practice session in a museum. That would possibly increase knowledge about what can be done in a museum. The knowledge about facilities in a museum seems very important for anyone interested in organising ECEC museum visit. Both museum educators and ECEC professionals recognised the importance of the initial visit and careful planning before taking a group into a museum. Knowing the layout of exhibition makes ECEC practitioners more confident. The possibility of meeting and discussing

the visit with a museum education officer mentioned by one of the interviewees would be highly appreciated.

As the interview questions were touching upon the new Irish ECEC curriculum framework the opinions of the two groups of interviewees differed in the subject of Aistear's role in promoting ECEC museum visits. While the ECEC professionals felt that the framework encourages them to look for new learning environments for children the museum educators doubted that it would be enough to attract this audience. They wished that museums were mentioned in Aistear along visits to farms and local heritage sites recommended in the framework.

Both groups of respondents recognised that museum educators should read Aistear to be able to point to the learning goals that can be achieved during an ECEC museum visit. Presenting such brief analysis or programme based on the Aistear content to ECEC practitioners would possibly encourage them to choose museums over other educational settings.

Interviewees mentioned improving ways of communication between sectors as one of the most urgent matters. ECEC professionals claimed that they were never informed about the possibility of visiting museums with groups of young children. They suggested that museums could inform about the exhibitions, events and times when young children would be welcomed. On the other hand, one of the museum educators mentioned how difficult it is for her to find a platform or organisation with whom to advertise museums to ECEC settings.

Interviewees suggested that museums should advertise themselves as being child friendly. General public may still have a stereotypical image of a museum being boring, stiff and difficult to understand. Therefore, one of the ECEC professionals gave an example of Irish art galleries, that promote themselves as places developing creativity, as a model to be followed by museums.

On-line communication seems to be equally important for both groups of respondents. ECEC professionals mentioned that Internet is their main source of knowledge about museums when they are planning their visits. Also museum educators seemed aware of the importance of providing sufficient on-line material. One of the museum educators remarked the need of a new website with resources and information that she was planning to develop for the museum.

ECEC professionals expressed their concern about museums being too crowded, too big or too cluttered to safely supervise a group of young children. Information about a special space for activities, leisure area or extra staff provided may be an encouragement to organise ECEC museum visit. Moreover, education officers should be prepared to work with young children.

Museum educators pointed to the need of providing interactivities for young children. It should be ensured that more tactile games and puzzles, things to smell and touch were available at a lower level in an exhibition. Accessibility and visibility of artefacts for young children is still an issue in many Irish museums.

Both groups of respondents recognised tight budgets an obstacle to provide better quality of ECEC visits. First of all, ensuring safety of the buildings became suspended. Not all of the Irish museums can afford to have lifts, child friendly furniture or sophisticated educational games and discovery rooms for young learners. Secondly, the additional assistance in funding of museum education was proposed by one of the interviewees. The funds museums avail of need to be distributed among several tasks museums have as public institutions: preservation, conservation, research, curatorship and finally life-long learning of which ECEC is only a minor part. Therefore any additional financial support directed to specific educational tasks would help developing museums' educational offer.

Interviewees noticed that the educational impact of a museum visit does not end when children leave a museum. Follow up in ECEC settings is recognised as an important part of every outing. ECEC settings by creating posters, portfolios or little exhibitions about what children have done in a museum may be encouraging follow up visits and promoting the idea of family museum days out.

6. Conclusions

6.1. Introduction

The selection of potential positive outcomes of a museum visit presented in the above chapters compared with the list of expected challenges proved that organising ECEC museum visit is worthwhile. The benefits obtained during such an outing are not only cognitive but also related to social skills development, aesthetic experience and play. All those connect with the Aistear theoretical framework that states:

Outdoor and indoor learning environments should be motivating and inviting to all children, so that they are encouraged and helped to explore and to use all the possibilities offered for fun, adventure, challenge and creativity (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2004, p. 55).

A number of potential learning outcomes have been listed throughout the study. Many of them are corresponding to the learning goals of Aistear but some enrich children's experience beyond curriculum.

Moreover, the study shows that both museums and ECEC settings that use Aistear are ready for cooperation. Communication proved to be a key issue as the two sectors seem to be relatively unfamiliar with each other. Better publicity of museums' educational offer and making the first step to establish contact by ECEC settings should result in the improvement of quality of ECEC museum visits.

Finally, the recommendations given by the interviewees point to both strengths and weaknesses of Irish museums and ECEC services. The study shows, however, that most of the obstacles can be easily overcome and that would open the gates of Irish museums for young visitors.

6.2. Impact of the study

The researcher can see several positive outcomes that this study brought when the work on it was still ongoing. First of all, during the preparatory stage when participants were sought several letters explaining the purpose and objectives of the research were sent to Irish museums, ECEC settings and Aistear Tutors. Although some of them remained not replied the researcher likes to think that they contributed into raising awareness of the problem.

To confirm this hypothesis one can refer to the response given by some of the interviewees who claimed that ECEC museum education was not in their mind until they were contacted by the researcher: *'You can really see, it's only now when you contacted me about this I really started to think about it'* [D], *'(...) this is really something I need to start looking into'* [C]. The interviews could be inspirational for both groups of respondents as they were analysing potential of ECEC museum visits in meeting Aistear learning goals. ECEC professionals were asked if they ever visited museums with children and their answers suggested that the questions prompted them to reconsider organising first one or just another museum visit. For museum educators the interviews were a reminder of the 0-6 age group as well as a way of familiarising them with Aistear. They expressed their interest in learning more about the new curriculum framework and possibilities of linking it with activities planned for children.

Respondents from both groups asked questions related to the topic of the study. ECEC professionals often wanted to know which museums in Dublin would be able to facilitate ECEC visits. Museum inquired about the actual recognition and range of implementation of Aistear. The researcher advocated for both Dublin's museums and Aistear trying not to influence the interviewees' response. To avoid bias the practical information were usually shared during informal conversations following the interviews.

Finally, all the interviewees wished to be informed about the results of the study. They expressed the interest in learning about the professional opinions, current practices and room for development or cooperation both in ECEC and museum sector. It shows that there is a need of further research in the area.

6.3. Suggestions for further research

This study is only an attempt to analyse the potential development of ECEC-museums cooperation. It showed that the Irish ECEC Curriculum Framework Aistear is a tool that not only facilitates education within ECEC settings but can also be used to advocate for children's museum visits as providing multitude of educational opportunities. Nevertheless, the area of ECEC museum education in Ireland remains largely unexplored.

Opinions shared by the interviewees during data collection process as well as difficulties experienced in searching for sufficient literature showed the researcher the

shortage of both quantitative and qualitative data regarding children's museum visits. The numbers of young visitors and the profiles of ECEC settings visiting museums are not known. Also any patterns or frequency of ECEC museum visits should be measured. In qualitative research ECEC museum education can be approached in many ways. Including greater number of participants from various types of ECEC settings and a bigger number of museums would enable researchers to come up with several interesting comparisons. Also taking into consideration different curricula and guidelines for ECEC may enrich any following study. Finally, involving children as participants of the research would result in interesting and even more convincing study.

6.4. Concluding remarks

The experience shared by the participants of the study proved that ECEC museum visits in Ireland are not common but also not inexistent. Those of my respondents who either took or hosted groups of young children in a museum claimed that children benefited from those visits. It was not memorising the historical facts but rather raising a long lasting interest that was mentioned as the major outcome of children's early museum visits.

By becoming familiar with museums at early age the chances of children revisiting them in the future raise. Therefore, early museum visits are being seen as a first step in the lifelong learning museum experience (Falk et al., 2007; Talboys, 2010).

In contemporary world learning can no longer be a domain of schools and ECEC settings (Jans, 2004). Museums have the resources, space and tools to make educational experience both meaningful and enjoyable for children (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007).

The responses of the two groups of participants of this study were diversified. The interviewees have different backgrounds, different experience in children's museum visits and their level of familiarity with Aistear differed too. Nevertheless, the image of possible development of museum education for ECEC was coherent. Moreover, the analysis of the interviews shows that Aistear can be interpreted in multiple ways and same learning goals are being achieved.

The name of the ECEC curriculum framework Aistear in Irish means 'journey'. One of the interviewees noticed that ECEC museum visits can be interpreted as journeys in many dimensions. Firstly, to get to a museum children should physically leave the ECEC setting and therefore they get an opportunity to experience journey literally.

Secondly, by learning about the events and life of people in the past they would create another imagined journey. Finally, according to Aistear every learning experience, and especially any of those of the early years, is a part of human lifelong learning journey ('Aistear', 2009). Together with the participants of the study the researcher wishes that the Irish ECEC services journey towards including museum education in the curriculum would continue and successfully enrich children's learning experience.

Podsumowanie (Summary in Polish)

Tytuł: *Dzieci w muzeum: Studium rozpoznawcze potencjału wizyt w muzeach dla osiągnięcia celów wychowawczych irlandzkiej podstawy programowej dla edukacji przedszkolnej 'Aistear'*

Niniejsza praca prezentuje wyniki badań jakościowych nad potencjałem wykorzystania wizyt w muzeach dla osiągnięcia celów wychowawczych nowej irlandzkiej podstawy programowej dla edukacji przedszkolnej *Early Childhood Curriculum Framework Aistear* ('Aistear', 2009) przeprowadzonych w 2012 roku w Dublinie w Irlandii. Uczestnikami badań były pracownice dublińskich muzeów i przedszkoli w których wprowadzono Aistear.

Dane zebrane zostały podczas wywiadów pozwoliły na analizę szeregu relacji między sektorem wczesnej edukacji i Aistear a irlandzkimi muzeami. Po pierwsze analiza wybranych celów wychowawczych podstawy programowej oraz skonfrontowanie ich z programem typowych przedszkolnych wizyt w muzeach udowodniło jak wielowymiarowym doświadczeniem edukacyjnym jest wizyta w muzeum dla dziecka w wieku przedszkolnym. Uczestnicy badań odnaleźli w muzeach potencjał do osiągnięcia większości ze stawianych przez podstawę programową celów wychowawczych.

Po drugie zebrane zostały opinie obu środowisk na temat szans i wyzwań dla współpracy między muzeami a przedszkolami. Uczestnicy badań wskazywali na możliwości edukacyjne muzeów inne niż te wymienione przy analizie Aistear. Wśród wyzwań wymieniano najczęściej nieprzystosowanie budynków muzeów, niedostosowanie ekspozycji do możliwości zarówno fizycznych jak i poznawczych małych dzieci oraz trudności organizacyjne związane z opuszczeniem przedszkola.

Na koniec uczestnicy badań podzielili się swoimi przemyśleniami dotyczącymi możliwości upowszechnienia i promocji wizyt przedszkolaków w muzeach w Irlandii. Postulowane zmiany to między innymi usprawnienie przekazu informacji na temat oferty edukacyjnej muzeów skierowanej do przedszkoli, organizacja kursów i wizyt pilotażowych dla nauczycieli przedszkolnych oraz lepsze dostosowanie strukturalne muzeów do przyjmowania grup małych dzieci.

Praca ta ma na celu wstępną ocenę sytuacji i pozostawia pole do kontynuacji badań oraz głębszej analizy.

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Appendix A.

Sample letter to a museum

[Museum name]

[Museum address]

Anna Cwidak

[Address]

[E-mail address]

Dear *[position held]*,

My name is Anna Cwidak and I am currently undertaking a small scale research project as a part of the International Masters in Early Childhood Education and Care programme at the Dublin Institute of Technology. The main aim of this study is to explore the potential of museum education in achieving Early Childhood Education and Care learning goals as listed in the Irish new curriculum framework *Aistear*.

Within this topic I am planning to look both at the Irish museums offer for young visitors and at the readiness of ECEC settings to visit museums in Ireland. I do hope this study would be of benefit both for museum educators and ECEC practitioners.

I am hoping to carry out several interviews with museum educators, ECEC practitioners and *Aistear* tutors. Therefore, it would be very important for me to get an opportunity to talk to the person responsible for children's museum visits in *[name of a museum]*.

The information gathered from the interviews will be discussed in my dissertation. The final copy would be available to my supervisor Professor Noirin Hayes *[e-mail address]* and external examiner as well as it may be later kept in the DIT library in Mountjoy Square.

I am willing to share the summary of the findings when the project is complete. Thank you for taking the time to read this information. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact me through e-mail *[e-mail address]*.

Yours sincerely,

Anna Cwidak

Appendix B.

Sample letter to an ECEC setting

[ECEC setting name]

[ECEC setting address]

Anna Cwidak

[Address]

[E-mail address]

Dear Manager,

My name is Anna Cwidak and I am currently undertaking a small scale research project as a part of the International Masters in Early Childhood Education and Care programme at the Dublin Institute of Technology. The main aim of this study is to explore the potential of museum education in achieving Early Childhood Education and Care learning goals as listed in the Irish new curriculum framework *Aistear*.

Within this topic I am planning to look both at the Irish museums offer for young visitors and at the readiness of ECEC settings to visit museums in Ireland. I do hope this study would be of benefit both for museum educators and ECEC practitioners.

I am hoping to carry out several interviews with museum educators, ECEC practitioners and *Aistear* tutors. I attach the set of questions that I am planning to ask my interviewee during the interview.

The information gathered from the interviews will be discussed in my dissertation. The final copy would be available to my supervisor Professor Noirin Hayes *[e-mail address]* and external examiner as well as it may be later kept in the DIT library in Mountjoy Square.

I am willing to share the summary of the findings when the project is complete. Thank you for taking the time to read this information. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact me through e-mail *[e-mail address]*.

Yours sincerely,

Anna Cwidak

Appendix C.

Sample participant letter

Anna Cwidak

[Address]

[E-mail address]

Dear Participant,

My name is Anna Cwidak and I am currently undertaking a small scale research project as a part of the International Masters in Early Childhood Education and Care programme at the Dublin Institute of Technology. The main aim of this study is to explore the potential of museum education in achieving Early Childhood Education and Care learning goals as listed in the Irish new curriculum framework *Aistear*.

Within this topic I am planning to look both at the National Museum of Ireland offer for young visitors and at the readiness of ECEC settings to visit museums in Ireland. I do hope this study would be of benefit both for museum educators and ECEC practitioners.

I would like to ask you to participate in a short interview. Before obtaining your consent I want to assure you that all the information gathered would be treated with confidentiality and your name would not be mentioned in the research paper. I also want to inform you that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.

The information gathered from the interview will be discussed in my dissertation. The final copy would be available to my supervisor Professor Noirin Hayes *[e-mail address]* and external examiner as well as it may be later kept in the DIT library in Mountjoy Square.

I am willing to share the summary of the findings when the project is complete. Thank you for taking the time to read this information. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact me immediately or through e-mail *[e-mail address]*.

Yours sincerely,

Anna Cwidak

Appendix D.

Consent form

Consent form

Title of the project: *Children's Museum Experience: Exploratory Study of Potential of Museum Visits in Achieving Learning Goals of the Irish ECEC Curriculum Framework Aistear*

I therefore confirm that:

I have been informed of and understand the purposes of the study.

YES / NO

I have been given an opportunity to ask question.

YES / NO

I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

YES / NO

I know that any information which might potentially identify me will not be used in published material unless I agree.

YES / NO

I agree to participate in the study as outline to me.

YES / NO

Date:

Name of the Participant:

Signature:

Name of the Researcher:

Signature:

Appendix E.

Museum question set

1. Background information:
 - How long have you been working in a museum?
 - What qualification do you have?
 - What visitors' age groups are you dealing with in your job?
2. Museum
 - Does museum provide educational opportunities for children aged 0-5? If so can you describe?
 - Does museum get visitors at that age?
 - How would you describe museum's readiness to receive young visitors?
3. ECEC museum visits
 - Can you predict what may be the most interesting for children during museum visit?
 - How in your opinion do children benefit from museum visits?
 - How do ECEC practitioners benefit from museum visits?
 - What are the challenges of ECEC museum visits in Ireland?
4. Aistear
 - Are you familiar with the new Irish curriculum framework Aistear?
 - Can you recognise which of the learning goals as listed in Aistear can be met during a museum visit? [list provided]
 - Are there any other areas in which learning occurs during museum visit?
 - How do you think can Aistear be used for promoting museum visits among ECEC settings?
5. Recommendations
 - What in your opinion should be done to encourage more ECEC museum visits?
 - Why in your opinion do some ECEC services avoid visiting museums?
 - What in your opinion can be the long term goal of ECEC museum visits?

Appendix F.

ECEC question set

1. Background information:
 - How long have you been working in ECEC?
 - What qualification do you have?
 - What age groups are you dealing with in your job?
2. ECEC setting
 - Have you ever been to a museum with a group of children from the nursery?
 - Have you ever heard about the possibility of visiting a museum with children from your setting?
 - What would be the challenges of organising a museum visit for your group of children?
3. ECEC museum visits
 - Can you predict what may be the most interesting for children during museum visit?
 - How in your opinion do children benefit from museum visits?
 - How in your opinion do museums benefit from ECEC museum visits?
 - What are the challenges of ECEC museum visits in Ireland?
4. Aistear
 - Are you familiar with the new Irish curriculum framework Aistear?
 - Can you recognise which of the learning goals as listed in Aistear can be met during a museum visit? [list provided]
 - Are there any other areas in which learning occurs during museum visit?
 - How do you think can Aistear be used for promoting museum visits among ECEC settings?
5. Recommendations
 - What in your opinion should be done to encourage more ECEC museum visits?
 - Why in your opinion do some ECEC services avoid visiting museums?
 - What in your opinion can be the long term goal of ECEC museum visits?

Appendix G.

Can you recognise which of the learning goals as listed in Aistear can be met during a museum visit?

The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework Aistear – selected learning goals	
<i>Aistear Theme: Well-being</i>	
1. Child will respect themselves, others and the environment.	
2. Child will discover, explore and refine gross and fine motor skills.	
3. Child will express themselves creatively and experience the arts.	
4. Child will understand that others may have beliefs and values different to their own.	
5. Child will show increasing independence, and be able to make choices and decisions.	
<i>Aistear Theme: Identity and Belonging</i>	
6. Child will feel valued and see themselves and their interests reflected in the environment.	
7. Child will be able to share personal experiences about their own families and cultures, and come to know that there is a diversity of family structures, cultures and backgrounds.	
8. Child will see themselves as part of a wider community and know about their local area, including some of its places, features and people.	
9. Child will understand the rules and the boundaries of acceptable behaviour.	
10. Child will develop a broad range of abilities and interests.	
<i>Aistear Theme: Communication</i>	
11. Child will combine non-verbal and verbal communication to get their point across.	
12. Child will interact with other children and adults by listening,	

discussing and taking turns in conversation.	
13. Child will build awareness of the variety of symbols (pictures, print, numbers) used to communicate, and understand that these can be read by others.	
14. Child will share their feelings, thoughts and ideas by story-telling, making art, moving to music, role-playing, problem-solving, and responding to these experiences.	
15. Child will show confidence in trying out new things, taking risks, and thinking creatively.	
<i>Aistear Theme: Exploring and Thinking</i>	
16. Child will come to understand concepts such as matching, comparing, ordering, sorting, size, weight, height, length, capacity, and money in an enjoyable and meaningful way.	
17. Child will gather and use information from different sources using their increasing cognitive, physical and social skills.	
18. Child will use their creativity and imagination to think of new ways to solve problems.	
19. Child will make marks and use drawing, painting and model-making to record objects, events and ideas.	
20. Child will feel confident that their ideas, thoughts and questions will be listened to and taken seriously.	

Aistear learning goals	ECEC professionals opinion	Museum educators opinion
Aistear Theme: <i>Well-being</i>		
<p>1. Child will respect themselves, others and the environment.</p>	<p><i>Oh, very much so. I hope it's not too much of respect: 'Don't touch that, don't touch that!' Yes, but I mean, they do need a level of understanding on how to respect things and not to break them. You know, they have to look after things that are on display and be careful. [B]</i></p> <p><i>Well, I think the well-being and the fact that the child should respect themselves. And definitely their environment because when they are in a museum the situation they learn is that you can't touch the paintings or you can't scratch the paintings, you can't run around because other people are looking, you know, they want quiet and things like that so definitely. [G]</i></p>	<p><i>In terms of working with children I take it very seriously to have a child protection in place. [C]</i></p>

<p>2. Child will discover, explore and refine gross and fine motor skills.</p>	<p><i>Only if they are allowed to have a go with something. [B]</i></p> <p><i>(...) the gross motor skills would be because they are outdoors playing and even there are stairs that they need to manoeuvre, you know, and glass cases they need to stretch to look into and things like that so there are gross motor skills. [G]</i></p>	<p><i>The motor skills and the creativity depends on the type of visit of course. So if they are just walking around they are not developing too much. If they are actually going to do some colouring, things like workshop that makes a difference. [F]</i></p>
<p>3. Child will express themselves creatively and experience the arts.</p>	<p><i>It depends what type of a museum [B]</i></p> <p><i>It's having to express themselves and their excitement about getting there, even before they get on a bus. [D]</i></p> <p><i>Because they will be talking about pictures, they will be talking about what they saw. Or if it is not a picture it is a stuffed animal, whatever they see there, they will experience and they will want to talk about that, share afterwards. [G]</i></p>	<p><i>I think that would kind of happen naturally really that they would think something creative and being individual and part of the group [A]</i></p>

<p>4. Child will understand that others may have beliefs and values different to their own.</p>	<p><i>Again that depends on what type of museum it is. It may challenge them a little bit in terms of what they consider people to be interested in. Because sometimes children have very strict, narrow ideas of what life is like, especially at this age. [B]</i></p> <p><i>I don't know how much of it is met but I suppose if the museum is of religious icons or something like that, you know, they can realise that that's not kind of pictures I have but obviously of other cultures and other people but I don't know how much. [G]</i></p>	<p><i>I would like to think that through the child protection policy that in interacting with children that would be the form of the venue, the tour guide or my mind in terms of social inclusion and cultural diversity within class, school, and obviously it is something that begins in a classroom but we would like to match it when they come here. [C]</i></p>
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<p>5. Child will show increasing independence, and be able to make choices and decisions.</p>	<p><i>You know, taking them out of their comfort zone where they used to know where everything is; their coats, their aprons, toilets. And they have to kind of manage a little bit more for themselves. It kind of gives them a little bit more of maturecy. [B]</i></p> <p><i>The fact that you are bringing them outside of the setting, you know, on a trip outside will kind of foster up their independence and that would mean a different experience and even sometimes getting on a bus may be different experience or going into town on Luas can be different experience, and all those huge buildings, you know, that fosters kind of interest or a sense of independence as well. [G]</i></p>	<p><i>I think with increasing independence that would be the self-guided space and discovery at the education area that they gain confidence by creating their own artworks and crafts. [C]</i></p>
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Aistear Theme: *Identity and Belonging*

<p>6. Child will feel valued and see themselves and their interests reflected in the environment.</p>	<p><i>A lot of the children from the age group it would probably be their first experience in a museum so I don't know how much they would be able to see themselves and reflect on that unless I suppose in the trip itself like their own interests and stuff like that. [G]</i></p>	<p><i>I think that when a child comes in and see the shapes and colours then instantly recognises 'this is a space for me', 'this is something I don't have at home'. [C]</i></p> <p><i>I am not too sure how the museum specifically... It's a high calling. [F]</i></p>
<p>7. Child will be able to share personal experiences about their own families and cultures, and come to know that there is a diversity of family structures, cultures and backgrounds.</p>	<p><i>I think for them it's almost like taking them out of their own community and finding somewhere different and they can maybe bring their knowledge and understanding from their previous experiences, with family members or something. [B]</i></p> <p><i>I suppose just very much sharing the personal experience with family members, then again to place themselves where they are within the world. [E]</i></p>	<p><i>I think number 7 links in really to social inclusion and diversity which is definitely a strong element of our education policy and child protection policy. [C]</i></p> <p><i>I would hope they would be able to share their interest though. And talk about it. To whoever. [F]</i></p>

<p>8. Child will see themselves as part of a wider community and know about their local area, including some of its places, features and people.</p>	<p><i>You know, bringing them out that gives them a sense of identity and belonging as well, you know, to be a part of the group. [D]</i></p> <p><i>And knowing about the local area because as I said [the museum] is in this area. So where we are that would be one of the landmarks of the area. Just to get to get the whole idea about the environment they are in and what is available to them around in that environment. [G]</i></p> <p><i>Because there are going to be other people visiting in a museum. There are going to be people in the transport on the way to a museum, you know. And to see that I am here to have a look at those things but so are the other people. And so I am like other people and we may not look the same, but we are all here for the same reason and stuff like that. [G]</i></p>	<p><i>And feeling part of something. You know, you feel fine with going in to public institution. [A]</i></p>
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<p>9. Child will understand the rules and the boundaries of acceptable behaviour.</p>	<p><i>Of course, because the museum, you know, you have to behave yourself, there is no way around, they can be quite strict when it comes to policy of behaviour and stuff like that which is proper and the children will learn. That is just not the place you can run in. You can run when we go outside. You can't touch the pictures, you can't, they really are only for looking at, you know. [G]</i></p>	<p><i>We would have a code of conduct in terms of children being within the museum. It is something that I want to work on for schools. Definitely it would be very welcome for the very small children under 6 because the exhibition downstairs as you can see there are lots of spaces for fingers and heads being bumped so I think we would like to promote that they would understand and respect the space they are in. [C]</i></p> <p><i>Yes, I would suspect they would be... The museums can be sort of a bit ecclesiastical in a... a bit church-like sometimes. I mean it's a lively place too but if they see how other children follow their teacher or a guide or their parents I think they would. [F]</i></p>
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<p>10. Child will develop a broad range of abilities and interests.</p>	<p><i>And I think their interest in art and in whatever, whatever type of the museum it is you can go to that may foster the interest and even I suppose from the parents point of view, like over here we are lucky that museums are free, where we are we are quite close to the city, so if the parents are seeing the nursery bringing them into museum that may sparkle and interest in them. [G]</i></p>	<p><i>They would definitely develop a broader range of interests. [F]</i></p>
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Aistear Theme: *Communication*

11. Child will combine non-verbal and verbal communication to get their point across.

I think that it speaks for itself because if they are impressed by the picture or another artefact that they see you can see it on their face as well as they will ask you questions about it. You know, and that is the opportunity when you can actually say: 'you know, that piece is very, very old', 'it was painted by such and such a person' and 'this is how old it is and we have to be very careful with it' so I do think that non-verbally you will their interest because sometimes with the scale of pictures, scale of objects they are looking at you can see the surprise or the wonderment on their faces and then they ask questions about it or even if they are not asking questions you can ask for information so the communication is there. [G]

There are all different levels of communication in terms of the tour guide communicating to them and then the communication with themselves or communication with the teachers and I think the tour element when they get to know the history of printing or they are being instructed on how to do the arts and crafts that they would make. [C]

<p>12. Child will interact with other children and adults by listening, discussing and taking turns in conversation.</p>	<p><i>And sometimes if you are lucky you may get a tourist guide and that is a great way to have, especially, ideally the guide would be geared to the age group, so that they can make it interesting and they can make it short so that they will hold their interest and then communication come slow in between two and if there is no tour guide available you can do that yourself as well. [G]</i></p> <p><i>They can answer their questions and things like that as well. [G]</i></p>	<p><i>If we get to do more kind of ECEC visits a lot of them would be based around obviously children communicating with either the facilitator or member of the museum staff. [A]</i></p> <p><i>So the sessions we run would be, like music is obviously popular, talking about what they make, children interacting with adults and listening to other children. Especially with toddler kind of workshops where they learn how to respond and, you know, be in a group which is a skill in itself. [A]</i></p> <p><i>Interactivity with other children, interactivity with a tour guide and interactivity with a teacher as well. [C]</i></p>
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<p>13. Child will build awareness of the variety of symbols (pictures, print, numbers) used to communicate, and understand that these can be read by others.</p>	<p><i>Again if they are allowed to find out, it's like treasure hunt or something when they go around and find things. Different shapes or symbols or something they can use [B]</i></p> <p><i>Well, there are lots of good museums which have texts very easy to read for children and down at their level, and maybe pictures and symbols to go with it so they can kind of follow the trail or follow a series of numbers. You know, you have to go to 1 and to 2 and then to find the 3. [B]</i></p>	<p><i>We got together lots of books and the history of printing we tried to incorporate lots of different things like the alphabet, so there will be alphabet jigsaw, alphabet tracing as well, numbers and printing as well. There are few books there like 'basic ABC' for the very little ones. We were basically trying to cater for every age group. [C]</i></p> <p><i>There are still signs in a museum. Not necessarily a lot of symbols but there are certainly numbers and letters, logos... So yes. [F]</i></p>
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<p>14. Child will share their feelings, thoughts and ideas by story-telling, making art, moving to music, role-playing, problem-solving, and responding to these experiences.</p>	<p><i>So I think that even if there is any museum some of the old pictures can be quite detailed in graphic and quite goy so children do get the chance to express their emotions and their fears and shock and wonder on whatever there is in the picture, especially when they are on a large scale. [G]</i></p>	<p><i>It depends on the type of the tour they are booked for but that can be achieved. [F]</i></p>
<p>15. Child will show confidence in trying out new things, taking risks, and thinking creatively.</p>	<p><i>And I don't even think that just necessarily to do with a trip to a museum but on trip and going out and about and reaching your destination and you know, do what it takes to actually get to where you go, and getting on a bus, and holding hands, and finding way to get there and stuff like that. [G]</i></p>	<p><i>And then hopefully trying new things. That is one of the aims of doing Babies on Board sessions. [A]</i></p> <p><i>We have the space to provide for this kind of interaction. [C]</i></p> <p><i>I hope that they would be more confident in themselves and their different skills. [F]</i></p>

Aistear Theme: *Exploring and Thinking*

<p>16. Child will come to understand concepts such as matching, comparing, ordering, sorting, size, weight, height, length, capacity, and money in an enjoyable and meaningful way.</p>	<p><i>Again it depends of what museum it is. If there is a shop museum they can look at money, old money and that sorts of things. [B]</i></p> <p><i>as they can be amazed how old things are or you can get that idea of height and how big something is and in relevance to... [E]</i></p> <p><i>And I think especially the lights of size, length and capacity, those are kind of things that the museum would definitely come into play because you know some of the pictures are very large, some are very small but even to compare themselves to the size of the picture or to compare to another picture or to compare how many things can be in that cabinet or I suppose if there be not so many. So you know those are kinds of things that can definitely be included. [G]</i></p>	<p><i>I think the museum can work very well in a way that we have handling objects. You know, so we have hats and shoes that we can always use in a way to help children think about clothing, winter clothing and summer clothing, you know, how old is something, comparing and sorting kind of activities. [A]</i></p> <p><i>We have actual alphabet matching. So match the letter with a picture. There is a game over there and we have other types of alphabet, so matching the shape with the letter. [C]</i></p> <p><i>I would definitely hope that this is one of the key things we can really get a child to develop by looking at objects, as much as comparing and doing that basic concepts. [F]</i></p>
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<p>17. Child will gather and use information from different sources using their increasing cognitive, physical and social skills.</p>	<p><i>I suppose it could be as well about their own learning and their own choices of what would they like to learn about. [E]</i></p> <p><i>And they will gather information from all different sources, for example how to get there, about what stuff you have to do, about which room has the biggest pictures in it, about where is the front door, you know, all different information. And their social skills, you know, 'just be quiet when you are here because you need to respect the wishes of other people, you need to respect that other people want it to be quiet and they want to read the captions, they want to look as well so you can't be noisy'. So all that social skills that they would learn from a museum visit. [G]</i></p>	<p><i>And we do have information in terms of the library and providing sort of intellectual access for little ones in terms of teaching them about the history of printing. [C]</i></p>
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<p>18. Child will use their creativity and imagination to think of new ways to solve problems.</p>	<p><i>Sometimes with and art they may come back with the idea that they have seen, you know, not necessarily but they may want to make a big picture or they may want to use different colours. So just something may sparkle their interest when they come back. [G]</i></p>	<p><i>They can, I mean, some of these such as model making and recording maybe if they do that in a classroom after the museum visit. [F]</i></p>
<p>19. Child will make marks and use drawing, painting and model-making to record objects, events and ideas.</p>	<p><i>Certainly if you did have drawing opportunities they could be 'drawing and making marks' [B]</i></p> <p><i>By being to a museum I suppose even subconsciously you may kind of put that in there as a choice of something to be when I grow up. You know, this is something I really like doing and this is something that when I grow up I can be an artist, I can be a potter, you know, the options for them are limitless. [G]</i></p>	

<p>20. Child will feel confident that their ideas, thoughts and questions will be listened to and taken seriously.</p>	<p><i>If they allow to ask the questions. [B]</i></p> <p><i>I mean you can imagine what the whole story and the whole chat is after they have been to a museum. [D]</i></p> <p><i>And I think if you are going to bother and take a child to a museum then you for sure care what they are saying and you are going to answer their questions. [G]</i></p>	<p><i>I think that again through the child protection policy and education policy we would like to think that every child should be treated the same and that they are giving you a bit of the opportunity to avoid their opinion and to be able to work with a child and ourselves. You know, they listen to and take that seriously in a group. [C]</i></p>
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A - Museum Education Assistant; B - Aistear Tutor & ECEC practitioner; C - Museum Education Officer; D - Crèche Manager; E - Nursery Manager; F - Museum Education and Outreach Officer; G - ECEC practitioner.