

Book Review

Snapshots of Museum Experience: Understanding child visitors through photograph
Elee Kirk and Will Buckingham, 2018, Routledge, London and New York, 178pp,
hardback, £92.00, ebook, £22.20

In August 2016, academic and researcher Dr Elee Kirk very sadly passed away following a second diagnosis of cancer. It was an enormous shock to her family, friends and colleagues, and it is heartening to see that Will Buckingham, Elee's 'partner, collaborator and friend', has turned her research notes and PhD thesis into an absorbing book. Whilst Will makes clear that museums are not his expertise, and the book 'is not exactly the book Elee would have written' (xiv), he has made sure that Elee's voice speaks out loudly from the pages and I think, has done her work justice. For reasons of transparency I was friends with Elee, our paths having crossed whilst both studying for our PhD in the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, and we also collaborated on research projects with the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (e.g. RCMG 2011).

The book explores the ways in which children experience, and make sense of, museums, using photographs taken by children, followed by interviews with them and their families. Elee's research 'problem' is that museums often focus too closely on the 'learning outcomes' of museum visits for children - often for instrumental purposes that are tied in with funding - and can therefore 'fail to understand the rich and complex experiential textures of children's museum visits' (3). As a consequence, Elee insists that 'not only do we risk seriously failing to take into account the children who visit our museums, but we fail to understand why museums might matter to them, and [lose] out on opportunities for making museums better for them' (3). From this premise then flows Elee's research, which aims to explore how children explore and make sense of museums from their own perspective, framed by a wider conception of what it means to experience the museum space. Elee draws on John Dewey's attempt to articulate a 'theory of experience,' where learning becomes one aspect of experience, which is both individual and social and is defined by both an 'undergoing' of something but also a more active 'trying' to reshape the world, as well as being shaped by it (25).

Equally important is the capturing of children's experiences through their own words, understandings and expressions. In this respect, Elee is guided by the Reggio Emilia approach and its concept of the 'hundred languages' of children, and the mixed-method 'mosaic approach' developed by Clark and Moss (29). Both these methods stress that children express themselves in many different ways, not only through speech and language but through, for example, their movements, writing, and drawings. Research methods are then developed to capture these different expressions. This rightly makes children the experts of their experiences. Although Elee does not ignore the impact that adults and other children might have on their museum visits, the main prism through which the 'world' of the child is explored is the 'voice' of the children themselves. Within the context of this approach, a sound and analytical explanation is given for why Elee chose photography as the main way in which children would capture their experiences of the museum, drawing on other research which has used this method successfully. The detail given within the book will help other researchers to understand the value of these approaches for capturing the voice and understanding of children. Rather less attention is given to why rich data can also be captured through *interviewing* children and their families. For me, it was Elee's expertise as an interviewer that elicited such rich and interesting conversations with children, which is just as important as the photographs themselves. It might have been helpful to explore this more in the context of working with children and young

people. Given that, what I especially liked about Elee's book is the importance she places on children's voices, not only in the methodology but also in the book's content. There are lengthy excerpts from her interviews with children (as well as interview transcripts at the end of the book) and she is also clear that it was her experience with one of the children (Kyle, aged 5) that helped to take her research in a radically new direction. Woven into the book, therefore, is an honest appraisal of doing research in museums, the issues and challenges that researchers encounter, but also the rewarding sense of engaging with participants (children and adults) and learning something new.

What I think is missing from Elee's argument, however, is a compelling narrative as to why it is important to capture children's voices, and what impact this might have on museums. The arguments are there but these, and the evidence for them, are scattered throughout the book and it would have benefitted from an introductory chapter that sets the wider scene into which this research sits. This would include the changes in museums which have seen many become more 'family' or 'child' friendly (albeit not without controversy), and a general understanding of how children learn, develop, and experience a largely adult-orientated world. Even asking the question 'how do children experience museums?' is an adult's preoccupation, and I think the book would have benefitted from more unpacking of what it means to be a child, particularly in the context that our understanding of what children are, and are capable of, is continually shifting and changing. The idea of children's 'rights' (which is tied up with the notion of giving children a 'voice') is still relatively modern, as is the idea that museums should be designed with children in mind - Western Park Museum in Sheffield and the Museum of Liverpool are two museums that have achieved this very successfully. Without flagging up this context at the beginning, Elee's theory of how children experience museums - navigating and negotiating, lighting up and making sense - seems isolated from how children experience other spaces that are not museums. Whilst stating that museums are unique and special places for children, how can we be certain of this without placing museums within the wider context of the child's 'world'? What can museums contribute to children's overall development and learning, and how does this compare to other spaces?

This book can only be a 'snapshot' of what Elee was capable of and, overall, I think it is a powerful testament to her research interests and findings, grounded in theory and Elee's professional background and research with a range of children in different museum spaces. Above all, her interest and delight in the experiences that children can have in museums shines through. This book, therefore, stands as not only an important reminder of Elee but also opens up questions about how her research, and research like it, could be used to explore, question, and even change how we, as adults, respond to children's experiences in museums.

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Reference

Dodd, J., Jones, C., Watson, S., Golding, V. and Kirk, E., (2011) *An Evaluation of the MLA Their Past Your Future 2 Programme 2008-2010*, London, Birmingham, MLA: Museums, Libraries and Archives Council