All About Collaboration

Making sense of health messages in a hands-on exhibition space

This book tells the story of a collaborative research project between Eureka! The National Children’s Museum and the Centre for the Study of Childhood and Youth (CSCY), The University of Sheffield.

Following the opening of the new gallery ‘All About Me’ – an interactive exhibition space all about the human body – Eureka! approached CSCY with the aim of working together to develop a deeper understanding of how children engage with health messages in this exhibition. The project began in January 2015 and fieldwork was completed in May 2015.

The Project Leaders were Hannah Fairbrother and Abi Hackett from CSCY, and Rebecca Caswell, the Strategic Lead for Play and Early Years at Eureka! including the Eureka! Nursery. Hannah, Abi and Rebecca also created this book, in collaboration with the artist, Rachael Hand.

It is our hope that in documenting the process of the research this publication will inspire more collaborative projects between the university and its community partners.

If you want to hear more about our findings visit the CSCY website: http://cscy.group.shef.ac.uk/contact-us/
The project team

Eureka! has a nursery, in an old railway station building next to the museum. Twelve children from the nursery aged two to four years old were chosen by nursery staff to participate in the study.

Museum Staff: Claire Graham, Dan Blamires, Rebecca Caswell, Jenny Goodall

Rebecca is in two photographs because she works with both the nursery and museum staff.

University Researchers: Hannah Fairbrother and Abi Hackett

Research Associate: Masoud Rajabi

Eureka! Nursery Staff:
L to R above: Claire Fahey, Zoe Reid, Sarah Cahill, Yvette Brown, Rebecca Caswell, Fiona Young, Laura Metcalf.
Below: Melissa Hall

Museum Staff: Claire Graham, Dan Blamires, Rebecca Caswell, Jenny Goodall
The project’s aims

For Eureka! a collaboration with the university was a chance to ask deeper questions about the relationship between play, learning and health messages in children’s experiences of their new gallery. For Abi and Hannah, the project represented a chance to apply the findings of their doctoral research (on children’s experiences in museums and children’s understanding of health messages, respectively) to a new, real world setting.

Honing in on children attending Eureka!’s on-site nursery, we identified three key research questions which were:

1. How do children engage with the exhibition and how does their engagement inform their understandings of being healthy and their own and others’ bodies?, attending to both their factual (propositional) understanding, and other, non-verbal (tacit) ways of knowing.

2. What do children take from the museum into other spaces and contexts?

3. To what extent is the meaning children make from the exhibition collective or influenced by the context of children’s visit (with family / friends)?
Fieldwork

Our approach to the study was ethnographic, in that we were interested in how children made sense of the exhibition and how their ideas and experiences fitted with the rest of their everyday lives.

Our fieldwork took place in the nursery, in the gallery itself and during a nursery visit to the dentist. We also collected examples and stories from the children’s homes which seemed to relate to the exhibition and how they might be making sense of the themes.

Our fieldwork was collaborative; researchers, nursery staff and museum staff all made fieldnotes, and collected video data and still images of the children’s meaning making. In addition, Rebecca carried out interviews with the children’s parents and carers.

Our data set includes:

• Fieldnotes (written by nursery staff, museum staff, university researchers)
• Video from handheld camera
• Still photography
• Maps the children made with their families
• Interviews with the parents
What is ethnography?

A helpful definition of ethnography is given by Sharon Macdonald, who draws on Miller’s description of ethnography as a perspective with the following commitments:

1. To be in the presence of the people one is studying, not just the texts or objects they produce.

2. To evaluate people in terms of what they actually do, i.e. as materials agents working with a material world, and not merely of what they say they do.

3. A long term commitment to an investigation that allows people to return to a daily life that one hopes goes beyond what is performed for the ethnographer.

4. To holistic analysis, which insists that... behaviours be considered within the larger framework of people’s lives and cosmologies.

Miller, in Macdonald, 2001, p72

Speaking each others’ languages

The journey from the university to Eureka! is 37 miles, so many of our conversations happened online. We developed a closed blog which anyone in the project team could contribute to, to share progress, developing ideas about the project and literature we had been reading.

Staff at the nursery made regular fieldnotes about children’s visits to the museum, play in the nursery and any questions the children asked about health and the body. Access to a computer is not convenient for the staff, so they used exercise books to write their observations, which were then scanned into the computer and added to a shared online drive.
Observations at the nursery

Masoud, The University of Sheffield

My early visits to the nursery were, I imagine, as exploratory and intriguing for the children as it has been for me throughout the research; for them seeing a relatively large camera on my shoulder, an iPad and a notebook in my hand while taking hasty notes, and for me observing and recording their conversations and interactions with one another and of course with themselves.

“Whereas space was once thought of as empty, available and waiting to be filled, recent theorizing about space has brought to light that space is a product and process of socially dynamic relations.”

Leander and Sheehy, 2004, p1
A visit to ‘All About Me’ from the nursery
Children visit All About Me with their families, 11 April 2015

Fieldnotes:
Children’s interaction with other children at the exhibition is much less when they are accompanied by their parents.

Fieldnotes:
At the exhibition parents try to exercise some levels of control over their children by telling them what they should or should not do. The instructions and rules seem to be explicit as parents constantly set boundaries for their children. Despite this, it was more likely for children not to follow what their parents wanted them to. On normal visits with child practitioners, the rules are more implicit, but children mostly are aware and follow the rules.

Fieldnotes:
Yvette - Nursery Manager - shows a picture of a heart to H and asks what is that .. H says ‘It is eggs.’

The children made collage maps of the gallery after their visit.
M’s collage map from the family day
11 April 2015
Where else do the children learn about health and their bodies?

The parents shared their thoughts with Rebecca as to where else the children interact with health messages. The responses included:

Trips to the dentist and hospital

At home:
brushing teeth, cutting knees and putting plasters on

Watching Peppa Pig and Cbeebies

Computer apps

Books about the body

Older siblings losing their teeth

Observing their own bodies:
why is pee sometimes more yellow? And watching scabs heal

Toys and role playing
“If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it.”

Attributed to Isadora Duncan
What some of our data looks like
Data analysis

We had masses of data (including fieldnotes, photographs, video clips, children’s map collages and audio recordings of staff workshops) recorded by lots of different people (including Masoud, nursery and museum staff, Abi and Hannah and the children themselves).

Abi, Hannah and Masoud worked through the dataset independently, looking for recurring themes and ideas. We each organised this task differently (using computer aided analysis software, cutting and sticking, making tables in Word) and then met up to compare notes.

“What is happening here?”

Heath and Street, 2008, p31

“Unknowing is proffered as a stance and a lens through which to re-imagine practices associated with educational practice and research, to be more open to new ways of knowing.”

Vasudevan, 2011, p.1154
Engaging with the data

**Hannah, The University of Sheffield**

Excerpt from the Blog

Abi, Masoud and I met for the first time today to discuss our thoughts on the fieldwork so far. It was great to talk through the field data (fieldnotes from the staff and Masoud, photos, videos) and share our ideas on emerging themes. We were reassured that we’d picked up on and were interested in quite a few of the same themes but it was also good to hear each others’ different ways of looking at the data. Our different research backgrounds and different experiences will hopefully help to create a detailed, nuanced picture of children’s engagement with the exhibition. I particularly enjoyed the chance to really immerse myself in the data and the videos in particular really helped me to feel more closely connected with the project (the article Abi mentioned – Knowledge Once Divided – seems really pertinent here).

With a view to gaining an overview of the data and a framework for our emerging ideas but also keen to ensure we don’t close down our thinking too early on, we’ve come up with some key themes (which may change as we proceed with engaging with the data) and also some sub-themes (which will definitely be refined, added to and changed).
“Children understand and perform their bodies in ways often different from adults.”
Prout, 2000, p.2

Fieldnotes: 3.3.15
The children then go over to the giant tongue. A and P both use it as a slide, standing on it.

Fieldnotes: 12.3.15
T ran straight to the digestion wall at the end of the gallery and pressed the burp button multiple times.

Fieldnotes: 19.3.15
I asked L what did she like about the museum in her last visit and she pretends that she is pressing a button and ‘it goes eh, eh’ and she laughs. L shouts ‘what is that eh eh’ and L says it was burping and both laugh.

Fieldnotes: 26.3.15
They all run off to the window and L goes to lie on the giant tongue.

Weier and Piscitelli (2003) emphasised the importance of full body engagement and ‘hands on’ learning in museums, which they describe as “hot and sweaty learning”.

Reflections from the research team:
intensely social, very embodied, often playing with the boundaries of what behaviour is acceptable, particularly with the burp machine. Always with peers, this kind of play and interaction was noticeably absent during the family visits. Also, the use of the burp button seems to increase as the visits progress.

“Agency emerges ‘in-between different bodies’”
Hultman and Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p.530

Fieldnotes: 2.3.15
The children then go over to the giant tongue. A and P both use it as a slide, standing on it.

Fieldnotes: 19.3.15
I asked L what she liked about the museum in her last visit and she pretends she is pressing a button and ‘it goes eh, eh’ and she laughs. L shouts ‘what is that eh eh’ and L says it was burping and both laugh.

Fieldnotes: 26.3.15
They all run off to the window and L goes to lie on the giant tongue.

Weier and Piscitelli (2003) emphasised the importance of full body engagement and ‘hands on’ learning in museums, which they describe as “hot and sweaty learning”.

Reflections from the research team:
intensely social, very embodied, often playing with the boundaries of what behaviour is acceptable, particularly with the burp machine. Always with peers, this kind of play and interaction was noticeably absent during the family visits. Also, the use of the burp button seems to increase as the visits progress.

“Agency emerges ‘in-between different bodies’”
Hultman and Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p.530
**Zoom**

**Fieldnotes: 19.3.15**
When A heard about visiting the museum, she said she was ‘going to see the robot’.

**From video taken on 19.3.15**
Children gather in front of Zoom and shout ‘Wake up! Wake up!’ Children then watch the robot and listen to her excitedly.

**Fieldnotes: 11.4.15**
H sticks 8 photos on the page and pointing at them ask me to look at them, and laughs excitedly. H shows a photo of the robot to me and says ‘He makes everything.’

**Rebecca, Eureka!**
I didn’t expect that after six or more visits the children would still be captivated by Zoom.

**“Exploring at a boundary, with one foot in a place of belonging and familiarity and another foot in uncertain terrain, requires courage and curiosity…….**

We found that the concept of a ‘boundary object’ was helpful as we sought to make sense of the data and the teachers’ role in this exploration.”

Carr et al, 2012, p.56

**Abi, The University of Sheffield**
Zoom was a real focus for the children in the gallery. They loved listening to his introductory talk, and interacting with him later on in the gallery. More than this though, he was seen as emblematic of the gallery itself, the person or thing you go to visit at the gallery, who is always waiting for the children, whether he is awake or asleep. Or as H suggests, the person who ‘makes everything.’

**Fieldnotes: 5.3.15**
Robot asking what do we eat? E (2 years): Food….no lollipop F (3 years): lollipop!
Dentist’s chair

Fieldnotes: 4.3.15
A then walked over to the dentist’s chair. A slid down the chair then looked at the teeth- with the toothbrush. Whilst A was brushing the teeth she said ‘my daddy do, dirty’. A then opened her mouth and showed me her teeth ‘dirty, my brush red’.

“Children become excited about what they are learning while they are playing.”

Association of Children’s Museums 2015, p1

Fieldnotes: 4.3.15
A was going early due to going to the dentist. A spoke about this and said ‘me going dentist’ ‘see teeth’. Told everyone that she was going as she was leaving the nursery.

Fieldnotes: 4.3.15
She watched as a child wobbled a tooth in the giant mouth. ‘He must have a wobbly tooth’. A practitioner asked her ‘why would it wobble?’ it falls out then you get another one, when you grow another one you will be happy again’.

Hannah, The University of Sheffield
Children enjoy role playing in the healthcare areas both with their peers and their families. This is particularly true of the dentist area. There is lots of interaction here - clambering up onto the chair; opening and closing mouths; peering in; choosing, using and taking turns with the instruments and even carrying the instruments around the rest of the gallery.

It is in the dentist area that children most strongly demonstrate how they link the museum space with what goes on in their everyday lives – they bring their everyday experiences into the museum space to inform their role play and their role play serves as a prompt for discussion about healthcare experiences.

Fieldnotes: 19.6.15
When we entered the dental room the children were very excited. P and L in particular were confident in sitting in the chair and having their teeth examined, L saying ‘I go to the dentist’. Both children had a sticker afterwards and this encouraged the other children to participate.

When we entered the dental room the children were very excited. P and L in particular were confident in sitting in the chair and having their teeth examined, L saying ‘I go to the dentist’. Both children had a sticker afterwards and this encouraged the other children to participate.

When we entered the dental room the children were very excited. P and L in particular were confident in sitting in the chair and having their teeth examined, L saying ‘I go to the dentist’. Both children had a sticker afterwards and this encouraged the other children to participate.

When we entered the dental room the children were very excited. P and L in particular were confident in sitting in the chair and having their teeth examined, L saying ‘I go to the dentist’. Both children had a sticker afterwards and this encouraged the other children to participate.

When we entered the dental room the children were very excited. P and L in particular were confident in sitting in the chair and having their teeth examined, L saying ‘I go to the dentist’. Both children had a sticker afterwards and this encouraged the other children to participate.
How CSCY & the research advisory group supported the project

Rebecca, Strategic Lead for Play and Early Years at Eureka!
Eureka! is a passionate and vocal advocate of play in all its forms. Our themed galleries are meant to function as springboards for play and learning, allowing children and adults to interact with the exhibits and activities in their own way at their own pace. We provide rich, tactile spaces that help children learn about themselves and the world around them through self-directed exploration of key issues that affect us all. Everything Eureka! does is underpinned by our belief that play has a genuine purpose. Because of this we wanted to gain a deeper understanding of how young children’s play in the All About Me gallery impacts on their learning and CSCY seemed the ideal partner to work with.

Abi, The University of Sheffield
CSCY focuses on children’s own perspectives and experiences of the world. The resultant insights lead to better outcomes and services for children, because often children are the ones best placed to describe their lives and explain their perspectives. This was the approach we took into partnership working with Eureka! and understanding what All About Me meant to the children. CSCY encompasses members from many different disciplines, and we were able to draw on this expertise in the form of a research advisory group, comprising:

Lisa Procter  Lecturer in Early Childhood Education
Penny Curtis   Professor of Child and Family Health and Wellbeing
Elizabeth Wood  Professor of Education
Zoe Marshman  Senior Clinical Lecturer in Dental Services
Liz Peniston  Visitor Services Director, Eureka!
Yvette Brown  Nursery Manager, Eureka!

We also had a useful dialogue with Jeanette Clarkin-Philips, lecturer in early childhood, and her colleagues at the University of Waikito who are carrying out research on nursery children’s visits to museums in New Zealand.
Rebecca, Strategic Lead for Play and Early Years at Eureka!

The collaborative approach has been really rewarding. Being able to actively involve the nursery practitioners and museum staff in the process, I believe, has added extra depth to the research. They have been able to bring their prior knowledge of both the children and the exhibition to underpin the evaluation of the observations. As a practitioner, many years ago, we had researchers come to the nursery I worked at on a regular basis, I had no knowledge of the objectives or findings of their research. Knowing what I know now, this was a missed opportunity, as I see that the project has widened the practitioners’ experience and given them a new perspective on observation and evaluation.

Masoud, Research Associate, The University of Sheffield

My involvement in ‘All About Me’ research project required regular visits to the museum and on-site nursery during February- April 2015. Every Thursday morning, I enjoyed driving through the Yorkshire countryside from Sheffield to Halifax, where the flamboyant pheasants were not too afraid of the early morning commuters. On arriving at the nursery, I have always been thrilled to see the welcoming and gracious faces of children and child practitioners who, despite their very busy schedules, were happy to support me through the project. The usual pattern was to spend some time at the nursery observing and documenting children’s conversations and interactions before heading to the ‘All About Me’ exhibition at the museum. Mostly, the visits comprised of a group of 6 to 10 children accompanied by two child practitioners and lasted for up to an hour. We all then returned to the nursery where I could spend some more time with the children while collecting ethnographic data. The excitement ingrained in visits to the museum was shared by every single child who participated in the research. Personally, I found the project insightful in terms of both the research findings and also the methodological approach.
Some of the texts we have been reading


**Clark, A. et al. (2013)** Understanding Research with Children and Young People, London, Sage.


Thanks

Lots of people worked together doing a lot of different things to really try to understand about these children and this place.

We would like to thank:

the children and their families from the study,

the staff at Eureka! The National Children’s Museum and Eureka! Nursery

our research advisory group,

and

The University of Sheffield’s Impact, Innovation and Knowledge Exchange strategy for funding the research, with a contribution from Eureka!

This publication was funded by the University’s Research Exchange for the Social Science (RESS) Co-producing Impact Project Fund.

Printed by Northend Creative Print on FSC certified paper