The Building Blocks of Museum Education: Examining Early Childhood Education Programs in Art Museums

Meghan Ann Lally  
*CUNY City College*

Recommended Citation
http://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc_etds_theses/396
The Building Blocks of Museum Education:

Examining Early Childhood Education Programs in Art Museums

By:

Meghan Ann Lally

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts of
the City College of the City University of New York

Dr. Marit Dewhurst

May 7, 2013
Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. 3
Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 4
Methodology ....................................................................................................................... 8
Review of Literature .......................................................................................................... 9
  Early Childhood Development ....................................................................................... 10
  Focuses of Early Childhood Pedagogy ........................................................................ 17
  Curiosity, Play, and Environment in Three Popular Early Childhood
  Curriculums .................................................................................................................... 26
  Museum Education ......................................................................................................... 31
Chapter 1: *First Impressions: Stories through Art at the Guggenheim* ....................... 38
Chapter 2: The *Yak Packers* Program at the Rubin Museum of Art ............................... 49
Chapter 3: *The PhD of WEE Arts* at the Children’s Museum of Art ......................... 60
Conclusions ....................................................................................................................... 72
Limitations of this Study .................................................................................................... 74
Future Areas of Study ....................................................................................................... 75
Addendum: An Early Childhood Program at El Museo del Barrio ......................... 76
References ......................................................................................................................... 84
Images ................................................................................................................................. 87
Abstract

Although museums are educational institutions designed to engage visitors in exploring objects and ideas, there is one part of the population that is often ignored by museum administrators: children in the early childhood years. This paper explores what art museums can offer to children in the early childhood years and examines the best practices to consider when developing programming designed for this age group. To initiate this project, three existing early childhood museum programs were studied: The First Impressions program at The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, The PhD of WEE Arts at the Children’s Museum of Art, and the Yak Packers program at the Rubin Museum of Art. Scholarship regarding early childhood development, early childhood pedagogies, and museum education, in combination with the above case studies, provided the basis for developing the best practices for early childhood education in museums. I argue that in order to cultivate the next generation of museum advocates, museums should reach out to this young population and provide them with positive museum experiences early in their lives. Based on these recommendations for best practices, I then developed a pilot program for early learners for El Museo del Barrio, New York City’s leading institution for Latino, Latin American, and Caribbean art and culture. My hope is that the following study will serve as a catalyst for future scholarship on utilizing museums in early childhood education and encourages museums to pay attention to this unique age group.
Introduction

The primary purpose of a museum is to educate. Whether that education happens individually when visitors come to see an exhibit, read the wall labels, and interpret art or objects independently, or within a group led by a museum educator or tour guide, museums provide a unique learning environment. In the case of school and group visits, museums can utilize the unique objects in their collection to spark curiosities and conversations among visitors, creating meaningful and memorable experiences for those participating. The Center for the Future of Museums, an initiative of the American Alliance of Museums, released a report about the future of museums that examined the impact of museum experiences. “Museums and Society 2034: Trends and Potential Futures,” examined the trends that are “most likely to change U.S. society and museums during the next 25 years” (Merrit, 2008, p. 7). Significantly, a group of “museum advocates” who were part of this study reported having a distinct memory of a “specific seminal museum experience, usually between the ages of 5 and 9” (p. 7). In addition the report predicted, “[museums] will be one of the most powerful agents in helping all children understand the future and ensuring they are prepared to take leadership roles in various sectors” (p. 7). However, in order to do so, museums need to be made relevant and accessible to children as they grow. Providing positive learning experiences early in their lives is one way to engage children and turn them into life-long museum goers.

In the same year, a study was released by the Education and the Public Interest Center titled, “Preschool Education and Its Lasting Effects: Research and Policy Implications.” This study outlined research regarding the short- and long-term effects of preschool education on young children’s development and learning and provided
recommendations for policy makers, based on its conclusions (Barnett, 2008). One such
collection was that, “Well-designed preschool education programs produce long-term
improvements in school success, including higher achievement test scores, lower rates of
grade repetition and special education, and higher educational attainment. Some
preschool programs are also associated with reduced delinquency and crime in childhood
and adulthood” (Barnett, 2008, p. 1). The above findings about the effects of preschool
education are not only important for schools and policy makers to consider, but museum
administrators as well.

When looked at together, the implications of these studies are monumental. They
suggest the potential ways museums may think about their youngest visitors and their
earliest experiences in museums as a way to build the next generation of museum-goers.
Early childhood programs in museums might also improve the general quality of
education that individuals receive. Thus these studies point to the importance of
museums including early childhood programs in museums’ strategic planning, making
them part of a long-term vision in addition to creating meaningful experiences for young
learners. Despite these findings and their implications for generating future audiences,
there are relatively few museums, especially in New York, that offer programs
specifically geared toward young learners.

As places designed for inquiry, learning, and innovation, museums need to start
focusing on early childhood learners and offering programs to support their growth and
exploration. Early childhood learners have very different developmental needs than
elementary and secondary school students, thus requiring a unique museum experience
that accounts for developing language and motor skills, shorter attention spans, and
budding curiosities. However, there is a lack of academic research to support the proper development of such museum programs.

With the above foremost in mind, this study explores the best practices for offering developmentally appropriate museum guided tour and workshop programs for early childhood audiences (ages 3-6, or preschool, pre-kindergarten, and kindergarten-aged children). It pays close attention to program structure, content, language, materials, and methodology. Through a series of case studies at the following museums, I examined the appropriate methodologies for looking at and creating art with young children: the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Children’s Museum of Art (CMA), and the Rubin Museum of Art. These investigations provided the basis for designing a pilot program for El Museo del Barrio, New York City’s leading cultural institution for Latino, Latin American, and Caribbean art.

I chose the First Impressions program at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum to represent an example of an early childhood education program in a prominent art museum in New York City. The Guggenheim is a leader in using inquiry-based methods in gallery teaching, providing an example of how this methodology is altered for younger groups. The Rubin Museum of Art added the perspective of an art museum with a culturally specific collection (the art of Himalayan Asia) to this study, and thus relates to the culturally specific programs designed for El Museo del Barrio. The preschool programs at The Rubin contain both a gallery exploration as well as a hands-on activity, providing examples of both types of school programs currently offered at El Museo del Barrio. The Children’s Museum of Art (CMA) provided an example of a safe and
developmentally appropriate early childhood program that is centered on exploring art materials and processes as an essential part of conducting hands-on workshops.

Using observational and interview data regarding these existing programs, combined with theoretical research about the development and learning processes of early childhood learners and the importance of early exposure to the arts, I have developed a guideline of best practices for museums to implement programs for preschool and pre-Kindergarten audiences. From these findings, I then designed an early childhood education program for El Museo del Barrio. Currently, El Museo del Barrio offers inquiry-based tours for K-12 students, adults, and senior citizens, using methods that are not necessarily developmentally appropriate for an early childhood population.

El Museo del Barrio is situated in East Harlem, where 17% of the population is less than 10 years of age, making it critical for the museum to reach out to the youngest learners of the community if it wants to stay connected and relevant to these individuals as they grow (as cited in Zillow Research, 2012). Along these lines, El Museo’s mission emphasizes a desire to impact its future audiences in its statement, “By introducing young people to this cultural heritage, El Museo is creating the next generation of museum-goers, while satisfying the growing interest in Caribbean and Latin American art of a broad national and international audience” (El Museo del Barrio, n.d.). To uphold this part of its mission, I believe that it is essential for El Museo del Barrio to create programming for young learners, especially those living and learning in the East Harlem neighborhood. I used the findings of this study to advocate for programming in this area of museum education. My hope is that this thesis will act as a catalyst for future research and programming involving early childhood education programs in art museums.
Methodology

There were several questions guiding my research for this study. The primary questions I investigated were:

- Using the unique resources they possess, how can museum education programs meet the developmental needs of early childhood aged children?
- What are best practices for designing museum education programs that address these specific needs?
- What are the similarities between early childhood education and museum education?

In order to address these questions, I looked at varying bodies of research including: Development in Early Childhood, Early Childhood Pedagogies, and Museum Education. Using this theoretical framework, I then examined the three case studies mentioned above to explore how these theories are put into practice. Based on these examples, I then designed a program for early childhood aged children to be implemented at El Museo del Barrio.
Review of Literature

The review of literature provides a theoretical framework for examining early childhood education programs in museums and draws from three major areas of research. First and foremost, in order to understand how museum education programs can meet the developmental needs of early childhood students, it was necessary to explore how young children learn. Therefore, I examined research regarding brain development and theories such as Constructivism and Behaviorism that discuss the ways in which children acquire knowledge. In addition, I also looked at the role art plays within this developmental process, as this is also linked to the programs in art museums that comprise the case studies. Finally, within this area of research, I examined social and emotional development in young children, as museum programs rely on group interactions and should help to foster this area of growth.

As a corollary to researching how early childhood students learn, it was then necessary to examine the pedagogies that foster such learning. Three areas of focus emerged in the research on early childhood pedagogy that differ from later educational models. Curiosity and inquiry, play, and environment are discussed in the theories of several scholars, although each scholar approaches these in different ways.

I then examined how these focuses are manifested in three prominent early childhood curriculums: Reggio Emilia, Montessori, and the Creative Curriculum. While these programs differ in their approach to early childhood education, they have the above three focus areas in common and provide insight into how preschool education theory is put into practice.
With the above aforementioned in mind, I examined museum education, looking specifically at inquiry-based and Constructivist methodologies followed by the current museum education programs available for early childhood learners.

Lastly, I examined the parallels between early childhood education and museum education, drawing correlations with the literature and setting the stage for the three case studies that follow.

**Early Childhood Development**

It is essential to explore the area of early childhood development as a basis for developing programs designed to meet the unique needs of this age group. In the following section, I examine how children’s brains work, specifically, how the brain develops and acquires new knowledge, and how that knowledge is organized. I explore both theories on knowledge and theories of learning, focusing on Constructivism, a popular theory that continues to guide museum education as well as early childhood education. I also examine the role of art in development, looking at how art contributes to knowledge collection and helping children to understand the world around them. Finally, I look at social and emotional development in order to understand the impact that early experiences have on one’s future learning.

**Brain development.** Brain research documents that the early years are the most important because the brain is developing rapidly (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002). Specifically, during the early years, children are most receptive to learning emotional control, relationships with others, and acquiring language and musical skills. The brain grows as a result of learning and experience. In fact, the physical structure of the brain
changes when a new skill or concept is learned that causes a synapse to form (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002, p. 5). Therefore, rich stimulating early experiences at this age create the best conditions for optimal brain growth and development in the long-term (Drew & Rankin, 2004, p. 3). Nurturing, stable relationships with peers and adults within a linguistically and cognitively rich environment contribute positively to healthy brain development and learning in young children (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002, p. 11). While the theories on the nature of these stimulating experiences have been argued for several years, they continue to guide the ways in which early childhood education is approached and are critical in understanding how we educate young children in both formal and informal settings.

Understanding how children develop is two-fold. We must examine both the theories of knowledge, and the theories of learning, both of which have changed over time and continue to be scrutinized. The leading view on how individuals gain knowledge and make meaning is Constructivism. Constructivism, an idea originated in the 1930s by Jean Piaget, a biologist, psychologist, epistemologist, and observer of child development, is the theory that individuals interact with their environments and therefore construct their own intellects. This theory, which has since gained widespread acceptance, was contrary to other theories of development held by Piaget’s contemporaries. Behaviorism, deriving from the seventeenth-century writings of John Locke, views the child as a “blank slate”, waiting and receptive to the environment writing on it (Hart, Burts, & Charlesworth, 1997, p. 33). In Locke’s view the environment is the primary influence on a child’s learning, inviting the teacher to act as the controller of that environment. The second view, known as Maturationism, is rooted
in the 18th century writings of Jean Jacques Rosseau, categorizing children “more as plants with biologically predetermined growth patterns and needing only a bit of skillful nurturing for successful development” (Hart, Burts, & Charlesworth, 1997, p. 33). This view lead to readiness assessment programs, deeming children “ready” or not to advance grades in school based on their accumulated skill set. Behaviorism lends itself to a more hands-on educational approach, while Maturationism allows for a more hands-off, informal approach.

While he didn’t reject these ideas, Piaget recognized their shortcomings. He was adamant that children are not passive recipients of environmental influences, insisting that instead children are active participants in the construction of their knowledge. According to Piaget, children construct their individual and personal understandings of what they encounter. This knowledge is layered upon, allowing children to absorb new information while filtering it through their existing set of knowledge (Cook & Cook, 2005, p. 5). Piaget maintained that children learn best when they are actually doing work themselves and can create their own understanding of it, rather than having adults explain it to them.

In addition, Piaget believed that children develop in stages, beginning with the sensorimotor stage during which the child learns through the senses and reflexes from the time they are born until they are roughly 18 months old. This is followed by the preoperational stage, which builds on the sensorimotor stage, lasting until about 6 years of age, and is characterized by a child’s formulation of ideas based on their perceptions of the world and their experiences. During this stage, it is important for children to problem solve on their own rather than being told what to do. They begin to use one thing to
symbolize another, a step that is critical to the future ability to recognize abstract understandings of things (Hart, Burts, & Charlesworth, 1997).

Each stage begins with the development of organized patterns that Piaget called “schemata,” in which actions are experimented with and new abilities are developed. Children move from one stage to the next by engaging in accommodation (the process of learning something totally new) and assimilation (the process of organizing this new information with previously gained knowledge); working together these processes allow children to reach cognitive equilibration, where all information has a place, and is therefore part of a larger construction of ideas (Hart, Burts, & Charlesworth, 1997, p. 34). The revolutionary idea that children filter their world through layered and personal experiences is critical to understanding how best to educate them. The early stages of one’s life are therefore critical to his or her future learning as it lays the foundation upon which new information is built, filtered, and connected. As children move from the sensorimotor stage to the preoperational stage, it is therefore essential to provide them with sensory-rich, real-life experiences to serve as interwoven building blocks for this foundation.

Revisiting and expanding on Piaget’s Constructivist theory, education researcher George E. Hein explored the theory of Constructivism, stressing the difference between a theory of knowledge and a theory of learning. According to Hein (1995), together these two elements form a theory of education. To this end, Hein describes the continuum of knowledge development, explaining, “It makes a difference whether we believe that knowledge exists independently of the learner, as an absolute, or whether we subscribe to the view that knowledge consists only of ideas constructed in the mind,” each of these
extremes belonging at opposite ends of the continuum (p. 8). Hein also juxtaposes this continuum with opposing views on how we learn, arguing that at one end of the spectrum is Locke’s Behaviorist view, “in which learning consists of incremental assimilation of information, facts and experiences, until knowledge results” (1995, p. 2). Opposing this is Piaget’s view that learning is constructed and involves the process of “selecting and organizing from a wealth of sensations that surround us” (Hein, 1995, p. 2).

Constructivism, therefore, according to Hein, stems from the belief that both knowledge and the way it is obtained are dependent on the mind of the learner. He continues, “Proponents of constructivism argue that learners construct knowledge as they learn; they don't simply add new facts to what is known, but constantly reorganise and create both understanding and the ability to learn as they interact with the world” (Hein, 1995, p. 3-4). This speaks directly to the early childhood stage of development. It is vital to remember that this age group is both developing the ability to learn while simultaneously absorbing the world around them in an attempt to make sense of it, because everything is new to them. The experiences they have and the environments they encounter are thus woven together as their learning and body of knowledge is constructed. Museums have the opportunity to capitalize on these formative experiences by providing programming that can be introduced to children at an early age, ensuring that the museum environment is one they are comfortable in.

Art and development. Art is one element in a child’s life that can help them process and make sense of new information as well as express their ideas. Research suggests that young children are highly capable of looking at and discussing art, using a tremendous amount of sensitivity and perception. Because everything they are looking at
is new, they are trying to make sense of it based on their constructed body of knowledge as discussed above. In her book, *The Story in the Picture: Inquiry and Art Making with Young Children*, author Christine Mulcahey (2009) argued that children are eager to engage in such conversations, which allow them to construct their own knowledge, appreciate diverse ways of thinking, gain imagination and critical thinking skills, encourages storytelling, and gives them the opportunity to share personal experiences (p. 3). It is this idea of constructing their own knowledge that connects discussing art with the Constructivist ideas of Piaget, Hein, and countless others. Not only does talking about art help children to construct knowledge by exploring new ideas in a safe way, but it also opens them up to new ways of thinking and ultimately new ways of expressing their newly constructed knowledge. Engaging young children in appreciating works of art can be done through “play, conversations, and authenticating the experience” (Danko-McGhee, 2006, p. 22). Through this process, children construct their own meanings and understandings about a work of art, rather than being told about it by an adult. Creating a safe space to express new ideas and test them out is accomplished by allowing children to tell stories, have conversations, and participate in play activities as they discuss works of art or create their own.

**Social and emotional development.** Social and emotional development has the power to shape future learning experiences for young children, ensuring that they are capable of learning and interacting with their peers and others in a productive way. Patricia Tarr and others have argued that we create meaning about objects and ideas through human interactions (Tarr, 2008, p. 23). She relates socialization to art activities, while Erik Erickson, a psychologist working around the same time as Piaget, had
previously explored the topic of social and emotional development on a broader scale. Erikson wrote a great deal on the development of young learners and the stages they go through, much like Piaget did. Erikson, however, focused on the cultural and social aspects of development. His theory was known as the “Eight Stages of Man,” beginning at birth and continuing until death. Each stage builds on the “resolution of conflict during earlier stages” (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002, p. 6). During the first 6 years of their lives, children experience three stages: trust versus mistrust (0-1 years old), autonomy versus shame and doubt (ages 1-3 years), and initiative versus guilt (ages 3-6 years). From the time they are born, children are learning to trust, gain independence, and try new things. Adults play a huge role in this process, and can help children grow through these stages (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002, p. 6). Trust, for example, is earned when a child’s needs are attended to. Autonomy is gained when children are free to try things on their own, with adult supervision, and have a positive result that is reinforced. Initiative, a critical stage for this study, is when children begin to try new things and experiment with purpose. They start developing a sense of future possibilities as they test out new materials and ideas. It is therefore the adult’s role to encourage this and provide new and exciting materials. This last phase is of critical importance when thinking about early childhood development and the possibilities it holds for future schooling and development. Positive social and emotional development has been linked to school readiness and academic success. Research also suggests that “Creative learning activities, such as dramatic play, block play, and open-ended art activities, provide opportunities for children to build positive relationships with peers…prosocial behaviors, such as cooperating, consoling, helping, and sharing, predict later academic achievement”
(Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002, p. 7). Harnessing their creativity within a safe and supportive environment, such as a museum, can therefore have a tremendous impact on how successful children are in future learning environments.

Early childhood interactions and experiences help to shape future school experiences, and ideally have a positive effect in creating a desire and aptitude for learning. Knowing how children learn is essential for museum educators to consider. Understanding that children develop socially by filtering new information through an existing body of knowledge helps us to design programs that are relevant to early childhood students and that use their existing experiences with the world as a starting place to layer new ideas onto. The essential role that art plays within this process can be easily addressed by museums, both in and out of the galleries. By looking at and creating art together, children are not only developing their artistic expressions, but their social and emotional skills as well.

**Focuses of Early Childhood Pedagogy**

When researching the topic of early childhood pedagogies, it became apparent that approaches to early childhood education differ from the views on later educational models because there is more of an emphasis on the following three areas: the link between curiosity and inquiry, play, and the environment. How educators and theorists approach these topics varies, but remains a constant focus and area of study. The following research discusses these three important focuses, examining how they are approached by early childhood education.
Curiosity and Inquiry. As Hein argued, children are not born with the ability to interpret the world as their elders do (Hein, n.d., p. 15). They are constantly collecting information from their environments and interactions with others, reorganizing it to make sense, and connecting it to other personal experiences. They are therefore, naturally curious. In fact, many theorists have argued that that curiosity is what drives learning at a young age. Piaget believed that children “learn only when their curiosity is not fully satisfied” (Mooney, 2000, p. 62). If curiosity drives learning, early childhood education should thus strive to keep children curious, make them wonder about the world around them, and offer them real life challenges. Progressive educator and philosopher John Dewey reinforces the role curiosity has in the education of young children, adding that it is children’s interests that should be the basis for curriculum planning (Mooney, 2000, p. 5). He believed that learning should start with the child’s interests and be fed by the adult’s attention to these interests, allowing the child to explore them fully.

Curiosity, however, doesn’t provide children with knowledge. Knowledge is formed when children find answers to their questions. Jennifer Goyna, educational content specialist and educator, argues that the best way for children to get answers is not to be told them, but rather to find the answers through inquiry and experimentation (Goyna, n.d., p. 2). The educator is therefore the one who “nurture inquiry and supports the child’s own search for answers” (Mooney, 2000, p. 62). Inquiry is a way of teaching and learning that encourages all participants—both teachers and students—to learn by exploring ideas and asking questions. While inquiry can have multiple definitions depending on the circumstances, it is based on asking open-ended questions that guide learning and investigation. It involves solving problems and discovering how things
work and connecting those findings with our own experiences. In early childhood settings, inquiry involves observing, doing, and questioning, much like scientists enacting experiments, or artists creating masterpieces. Inquiry is also social, allowing children to construct knowledge collectively as well as individually. As children ask and answer questions and explore various concepts and ideas, their social skills increase and their ability to work together and be receptive to each other’s ideas and opinions increases. Early childhood educational settings, both formal and informal are designed to prepare children for future learning settings. Engaging students’ curiosities, fueling them with additional questions and wonder, sparks this lifelong love of learning, or at least sets the stage for it. Goyna reiterates the connection between curiosity and inquiry affirming, “The idea is to start children on a journey from curiosity to inquiry by fueling their curiosity—by asking purposeful questions, supplying hands-on tools for exploration and discovery, dedicating blocks of time for exploration, and creating an environment that encourages observation, demonstration, and explanation—and then stepping aside a bit so inquiry can freely develop” (n.d. p. 6). This supports the ideas of Dewey and Piaget that curiosity fuels learning, or at least the desire to learn. When curiosity is met with new challenges, children construct a body of knowledge around it, thus advancing their development.

Like science-based curriculum that involves the discovery of new ideas and outcomes, inquiry-based art activities offer students many of the same learning opportunities. Rebecca Shulman Herz, citing her experience at the Guggenheim Museum, argues that children create new meanings through the intersection of what they already know and believe with new ideas and knowledge (Herz, 2010, p. 1). In her explanation
of the “Art Investigation Methodology,” Herz also argues that prior to second grade children can truly participate in this process, stating, “It is often difficult for them to engage as a group in the interpretive work of delving deeper” (Herz, 2010, p. 7). She claims instead that younger children get “excited about looking at art and sharing their observations” and like to identify or name things, categorize, and relate what they are seeing in the artworks to experiences in their own lives, in addition to hearing and telling stories about the image (Hertz, 2010, p. 7). While this may be true, we know that individuals interpret the world by filtering it through their existing body of knowledge. With limited world experience, the conversations had about a work of art by early childhood-aged children may look and sound very different than older students, but the process is arguably the same for them. It is an important skill to develop and one that is best started early. Herz herself argues that students “need opportunities to connect existing ideas and knowledge with the work in front of them and make their own meanings from these connections (Herz, 2010, p. 1).” Young children, with naturally curious minds, are trying to understand what they are seeing in front of them, and will naturally want to know more and discuss what they are seeing.

Several educators have documented that art making is a natural occurrence of childhood, something that they will pursue even without the intervention of an adult (Thompson, 1995, p. 1). If this is the case, children also need the language to be able to talk about what they have done. Educator and researcher Connie Newton, argues that language is “a major component of learning in art” (Thompson, ed., 1995, p. 80). She argued that this language should go beyond knowing about elements of art, and should include a language “rich in adjectives, adverbs, verbs, and nouns which children may use
to describe, discuss, and interpret works of art” (p. 80). They should, in essence, have enough language to communicate their thoughts, ideas, feelings, and meanings about art. It seems then, that the inquiry method for looking at art, as Herz described, would be advantageous to expose young children to, helping them to develop language that enables them to not only discuss works of art by others, but those made by themselves as well. Christine Mulcahey recognized children’s tendency to interpret what they see based on their personal experiences, adding that it is the educator’s job to accept these interpretations, regardless if they are correct, in order to create a safe space for children to share additional ideas and observations (2009, p. 3). By sharing these personal experiences, children not only begin to understand themselves, but their peers as well, thus further developing their social and emotional capabilities along with their descriptive language skills.

**Play.** An equally important element of a child’s development is allowing for adequate time to play. Freidrich Froebel, a leader in the early childhood education field and the educator and theorist responsible for creating Kindergarten, believed that children need to be active and engaged in meaningful play. While several educators and theorists have redefined the definition of play over the years, Froebel viewed play as a “self-selected” activity that is intrinsically motivated and an essential part of a child’s development (Neumann, 1971, p. 22). He was not content to accept the “happy exuberance of play, but he watched for evidences that symbolized the awakening of the child’s inner nature” (Weber, 1984, p. 37-38). To this end, Froebel designed a series of devices and activities designed to serve as hands-on learning aids to help children learn about the natural world around them by recreating and reimagining it. His ideas are still
used today in many classrooms; for instance block play was something essential to Froebel’s vision of early learning, which he believed begins shortly after birth (Provenzo, 2009, p. 87).

Piaget, along with his contemporary Maria Montessori (whose work will be discussed more in-depth later), believed that uninterrupted periods of play are important, arguing that children should be left alone when they are interested and involved in a project, leaving the educator to ask open-ended questions to help a child think and problem solve. Piaget argues:

So the child when it plays is developing its perceptions, its intelligence, its impulses toward experiment, its social instincts, etc. This is why play is such a powerful lever in the learning process of very young children, to such an extent that whenever anyone can succeed in transforming their first steps in reading, or arithmetic, or spelling into a game, you will see children become passionately absorbed in those occupations, which are ordinarily presented as dreary chores. (Piaget, 1970, p. 155).

Today, psychologist Peter Gray has written several articles about the definition of play, arguing that play “is a means by which children develop their physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and moral capacities…It also provides a state of mind that, in adults as well as children, is uniquely suited for high-level reasoning, insightful problem solving, and all sorts of creative endeavors” (Gray, 2008). Gray emphasizes the importance of play, including its critical social aspect, while enumerating on the vast effects it can have on both children and adults alike.

Lev Vygotsky, contradicted and expanded on some of Piaget’s findings, also believed that children’s knowledge is constructed through playful personal experiences. He viewed play as children’s work, and believed it is the highest level of development for a child (Henderson & Atencio, 2007, p. 246). However, he extended this construction to
include social interactions, believing that the two cannot be separated. Children therefore rely on play as a means of constructing knowledge, helping them build language and learn about new situations and ideas. This element of their development tells us that they learn best socially.

Collaborative learning is a natural outgrowth of Vygotsky’s theory, emphasizing that cognitive development is driven by social interaction and that a peer can be effective in helping a child learn. Henderson and Atencio also maintained that play affords “cognitive challenge; play allows children to develop creativity, problem-solving, logic, social knowledge, and language (Henderson & Atencio, 2007, p. 246).” They emphasized that learning is fundamentally social adding that the knowledge students acquire is integrated in the life of their community (Henderson & Atencio, 2007, p. 245). Addressing the communal nature of learning, Paulo Freire, an educator, philosopher, and proponent of critical pedagogy, argued that we bring our values, beliefs, and backgrounds into the classroom and share them in the act of communication (Mulcahey, 2009, p. 9). Freire’s many contributions to the education world are linked to his writings about the connections between political oppression and the educational system. While his experience was primarily with adult education and empowerment, his theories apply to all levels of education. He advocated for the active involvement in one’s own education while maintaining that people bring their own knowledge and experience into the educational process and therefore it is never neutral. He emphasized the importance of dialogue in education, giving all parties a safe environment to voice their thoughts and ideas. While he was focused on older learners, this concept can, and should, also be looked at for our youngest learners. It is important, as they grow and develop social and
emotional skills, to feel comfortable conversing with one another as well as with adults. Empowering young children to be a part of their education, whether it is through play, as discussed above, or through answering and asking questions in an inquiry-based method, is something that can shape their future learning. Children share values and ways of thinking with those around them, thus reflecting and creating the community around them. Creating an environment in which children feel safe and empowered to play, learn, discover, share ideas, and explore their curiosities is thus of critical importance in early childhood education both in schools and museums.

**Environment.** What types of environments encourage productive play and meaningful interactions? Educator and theorist Maria Montessori wrote a tremendous amount on what developmentally appropriate environments offer to a child and how they should be created to maximize learning. Many of her ideas were revolutionary at the time, and have since become commonplace, but are nonetheless important to remember when thinking about early childhood learning standards. She believed that children should be given real tools that work to provide them with real-life experiences. Environments should also have all materials and equipment accessible to the children. Items should be appropriately sized and materials should be organized so that children feel empowered to use the items around them. Montessori believed that this helped children engage in long periods of concentrated play, exploring many different interests with the freedom they are given.

Similar to the intentions of the role of the environments created in the Montessori model, but working in the United States, John Dewey agreed that children learn from doing and that real-life experiences were paramount in helping children learn. He, too,
believed that children’s own interests should guide their learning, but instead gave the teacher the role of guiding those interests to form the child’s curriculum. He thought that children needed help from their teachers in making sense of their world and therefore teachers should observe children carefully and design their lessons based on these observations (Mooney, 2000). Piaget explained that active engagement with one’s environment is what guides learning. Having access to a variety of materials to handle, children learn to classify, sort, compare, sequence, etcetera (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002, p. 8). A child’s knowledge thus expands as she experiments with new and interesting materials in her environment. They layout of an environment is critical. As Montessori, Piaget, and Dewey emphasize, setting up an environment that supports long periods of free-play where children are free to regulate their actions independently is optimal. Making sure the environment is age appropriate, safe, and inviting is therefore a role that the teacher or adult must take responsibility for.

Creating an environment that allows for a child to explore his or her own curiosities occurs naturally in a museum. Museums are designed for this type of hands-on learning. It is critical to understand how this environment is created and what museums can do to help foster a child’s development. The elements of play, curiosity, and the environment are prevalent in early childhood education. Borrowing from this field allows museum educators to examine these elements as they relate to the best practices that should be employed when guiding early childhood students through an art museum experience.
Curiosity, Play, and Environment in Three Popular Early Childhood Curriculums

It is important to explore how these theories are approached in early childhood curriculums, with the above focus areas of early childhood education in mind. Understanding how these areas intersect and overlap is critical to creating meaningful experiences for young children. This research focuses on three popular curricular approaches: Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and the Creative Curriculum. Each of these is based in the theories explored above but applies those theories of how children learn best in very different ways.

Montessori Schools. While Dewey places more of an emphasis on the teacher’s role than Montessori, Piaget, or Vygotsky, all of these theorists helped to push progressive ideas of education and how children learn. Many of their theories continue to influence early childhood education today, influencing several curriculums and pedagogies throughout the world. Dr. Maria Montessori’s practices now seem commonplace, but at the time she developed them were revolutionary. She placed an emphasis on the environment that early childhood learners thrive in. She acknowledged that physical factors as well as human interactions affect the learning space. She believed that children learn best through sensory activities and should therefore be provided with environment that reflects that. Part of this positive learning environment for Montessori included age and size-appropriate furniture that allowed children access to the tools and objects they seek to use. She also believed that it is critical for teachers to provide real tools to use, meaning knives that could really cut, tools that could be used for cleaning or building in authentic ways, and so on.
It is therefore the teacher’s role to make sure the space is kept tidy and organized so that children can easily find the things they need. Montessori believed that children learn best from their environment without much intervention from adults once they are in such a space. In addition to creating a space, Montessori believed that children should guide their own learning and care for the environment the educator created. The children therefore are the ones who clean up after they are finished playing. This can be done easily if the room is organized in a way that makes putting items away easy for children. As mentioned above, this environment also fosters children’s ability to have long periods of uninterrupted play. They have time to explore the objects that are at their fingertips while their teachers carefully observe their actions and interactions, noting developmental advancements and interests of the children (Mooney, 2000).

The Reggio Emilia Approach. One growing school of education is the Reggio Emilia model, which developed after World War II in Northern Italy. Its popularity is growing all over the world, including the United States. At the heart of this philosophy is the idea that children’s interactions and relationships with others (both other children and adults) are vital to their growth and learning (Schiller, 1995, p.46). In addition, art is an integral part of all aspects of the Reggio Emilia curriculum. Children are encouraged to represent their learning in an artistic way. Upon observing Reggio Emilia in action as part of a study on this approach, Katz referred to this type of art making as “graphic language” (Schiller, 1995, p.46). He adds, “The visual arts are integrated into the work simply as additional ‘languages’ available to young children not yet very competent in conventional writing and reading.” The teacher’s role in this case is to set broad curriculum goals, but also follow the interests of the children. Teachers are expected to
help guide the children in their art making processes, helping them explore new materials and open new possibilities.

The focus that Montessori has on creating a creative and inviting environment is taken to the next level in the Reggio Emilia classroom, offering students art as an inviting way to explore ideas, both together and individually. With art as a central component of the curriculum, the Reggio Emilia approach demonstrates how children can communicate alternatively before their written and oral languages fully develop. With art as a central component to the curriculum in Reggio Emilia schools, Schiller explains that children “became interested in other artists as well and began to request group discussions that included a new artist and the artist’s works” (1995, 48).

**The Creative Curriculum.** Beginning roughly 30 years ago, a new approach to early childhood education emerged. Envisioned and written by educator Diane Trister Dodge, the Creative Curriculum has its roots in the research of several of the above theorists including Piaget, Erikson, Vygotsky, and so on. The curriculum is designed for children from birth to age eight and has five guiding principles that derive from an extensive body of research. First and foremost, the Creative Curriculum asserts, “Positive interactions and relationships with adults provide a critical foundation for successful learning” (Teaching Strategies, 2010, p.2). This relates to the trust/mistrust stage that is described by Erikson and the need for the adults in children’s lives to have an active role in making children feel safe and supported from the time they are born through this critical stage in development. This belief is also derived from Dewey’s writing that the classroom is a community in which children learn in collaboration with each other and their teachers (Teaching Strategies, 2010). This also correlates with the
Creative Curriculum’s next principle, which states, “Social-emotional competence is a significant factor in school success” (Teaching Strategies, 2010). This is based on several theories but also extends to research about school readiness. The Creative Curriculum’s social and emotional focus is based on research that links early prosocial behaviors to success in later academic environments. Part of this social-emotional development is achieved through the third principle stating, “Constructive, purposeful play supports essential learning” (Teaching Strategies, 2010, p.2). As reflected in the research above, play is also a key component to early childhood development; the Creative Curriculum supports the need for play within the school day. The Creative Curriculum also emphasizes the physical environment, linking it to the quality of learning that takes place as its fourth pillar. Finally the curriculum supports the idea that, teacher-family partnerships promote development and learning, reflecting the idea that a child develops best within a supportive network of both adults and peers and that family plays an integral role in the development of their children (Teaching Strategies, 2010, p.2). These pillars form the foundation of the curriculum that combines the above theories into an organized routine for the child’s school day.

Both the day and the environment is structured, but within that structure there is ample room for children to make choices. The room is divided into centers. For instance, a block center, a dramatic play center, a science and inquiry center, an art center, and so on. During “free play” time, children are allowed to choose between these centers and are free to play as they wish. As was the case with Montessori’s methods, the materials are clearly labeled, but the daily routine is predictable, providing some stability and a level of comfort for the students. Within this structured environment, children have
the freedom to make choices and to initiate activities based on their curiosities, which provide a framework for their learning (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002). The teachers in this case take on the role of supporting and guiding that learning process. They may add materials to enhance the learning of students or offer them additional materials if students demonstrate a particular interest in something. The Creative Curriculum seems to be the middle ground between a completely teacher-structured environment and a child-structured environment, offering a compromise that results in children choosing areas based on their interests and teachers using these interests to guide further learning.

While these three approaches may differ slightly, they instruct museum educators on the approaches to early childhood education that can also help guide learning in the museum. The focus that Reggio Emilia schools have on artistic practices sheds light on how art museums can enhance learning by providing an arts-rich environment and encourages students to use the language of art. The Creative Curriculum approach most closely mirrors a museum education approach for this age group. This pedagogical approach values structure, while also providing open-ended activities and explorations of objects and allowing children to participate in extended periods of free play. Museum education models this approach in guided tour and workshop structures, as a museum educator must lead the group through the galleries or workshops and provide structure. However, they also ask open-ended questions and allow for independent and group explorations of objects and ideas.
Museum Education

Museum education is a broad and growing topic, however, for this study, looking more particularly at inquiry-based methodology and its relationship to Constructivism is important because of its strong connection to the ways in which children’s learning is fostered. In addition, the small body of research regarding existing museum programs for this age group is discussed, highlighting what can be applied to establish best practices for the field.

Inquiry and Constructivism. When one considers the open-ended, inquiry-based, and creative environments that help children grow and learn it is hard to believe that art museums may not immediately come to mind. The current and growing trends towards more inquiry-based museum education methodologies are strikingly similar to the conversations about early childhood education. George Hein, a leading authority in museum education and author of *Learning in Museums*, makes the connection between museum education and progressive education, arguing that they arose during the same historical period and have many commonalities. He emphasizes the similar pedagogies based on experience (as sited by Piaget, Vygotsky, Montessori, etc.), interaction with objects, and inquiry (Hein, 2006, p. 161). According to Hein (2006), the origins of museums and the evolution of their educational nature reflect societal trends, most notably, the expansion of public education. He specifically cites the progressive education proposed by John Dewey, particularly the emphasis on real-life, practical experiences, as influencing the ways in which museums work with objects and collections. Supporting his claim, Hein gives the example of Anna Billings Gallup, who worked roughly a century ago in the Brooklyn Children’s Museum. Gallup was
concerned with children’s abilities to handle objects and explore what they were curious about or found interesting and thus provided these children with objects to touch, ask questions about, and even take home as a loan, much like a library book. This focus on using objects to teach in an open-setting is highly reflective of the goals and ideals of early childhood education that was growing in popularity at the time as well. However, there continues to be very little research that directly links museums—especially art museums—to early childhood educational programming.

**Current Early Childhood Programs in Museums.** There is a small body of research that discusses approaches to museum education for young learners. A great deal of this research focuses on science and inquiry-based museum experiences or children’s museums, but much of this can also be applied to art museums, with minimal modifications. In their 2007 article, “Integration of Play, Learning, and Experience: What Museums Afford Young Visitors,” Tara Zollinger Henderson and David J. Atencio, make recommendations for maximizing children’s learning in museum, emphasizing the inclusion of play in the learning experience. Using play as an approach to learning in museums takes the social aspects of learning into consideration, and establishes a supportive and engaging environment (Zollinger & Atencio, 2007). They found that “when young adults were asked to recall field trips taken during their kindergarten to twelfth grade years, visits that were remembered as primarily hands-on were more salient than those visits to museums that were less hands-on” (p. 249). Going one-step further, Zollinger and Atencio stated, “Individuals remembered more educational information and had a more enjoyable experience on field trips that required hands-on participation compared to the field trips that did not” (p. 249). This conclusion aligns with the
aforementioned theories that children learn best by participating in real-life experiences and that they are driven by curiosity. Nina Jensen echoes the same findings in her research regarding what children remember from museum visits, stating, “[children] remembered trips where their involvement was high. Participating in gallery lessons including activities, and being assigned to be a leader or the demonstrator of a concept were experiences that children recalled quite vividly” (Nina Jensen, 1992, p.25). She adds that children also recalled museums to which they made repeat visits, which adheres to what is known about the developing brain. Research states that “learning needs to be reinforced over and over” for a connection to become permanent (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002, p.5).

Pinpointing a particular art museum program, Angela Eckhoff (2007) examined the early childhood programs at the Denver Art Museum, discussing the importance of art-viewing opportunities for young learners. Eckhoff emphasizes the importance of the museum environment and its potential to serve as a platform for exchanging ideas amongst early learners as they develop and learn socially as well as individually. She states, “The sociocultural nature of a museum-based educational setting is undeniable. All components of the setting—teachers, children, artworks, art materials—come together to create arts learning experiences” (Eckoff, 2007). Here, Eckoff is mirroring the language used in early childhood education practices as she emphasizes the importance of the environment in learning, much as Montessori and other progressive educators had when revolutionizing early childhood learning. In addition to the environment, she reiterates the importance of social and emotional development in early
childhood education that is provided within the museum setting as children share and exchange ideas.

In *Learning in the Museum*, Hein (1998) further explores the history of museum education in conjunction with the theories of Dewey, Vygotsky, and others. He explains that visitors learn best when knowledge is actively constructed in their own minds, using exhibitions that are accessible to every single visitor. While art may not seem accessible to all, and may even come across as difficult to understand (as several researchers have shown) this simply isn’t the case for young children. They are eager to share ideas and interpret even the most abstract works. Hein’s views lend support to argument for providing educational programs to preschool students to make exhibitions accessible to them and include them in the learning process. Nina Simon recently published *The Participatory Museum*, a “practical guide to working with community members and visitors to make cultural institutions more dynamic, relevant, essential places” which echoes and expands upon this idea of accessibility (Simon, 2010). This begs the question, why not start that participation in the early childhood years? Sharon Shafer (2008), Executive Director of the Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center, argued that children are natural collectors, often fascinated by new objects and the ways in which they can be sorted. By extending museum participation to younger learners, museums become a part of their educational scaffolding early on, helping to solidify their place of importance.

In addition to these researchers advocating for museum education programs, the American Alliance of Museums and the Institute for Museum and Library Services are commissioning several studies of the current nature of museums and on the direction that
museums can or should go. At a recent panel with IMLS, the topic of early childhood education and museums was finally discussed, and is being put on the agenda for future grant funding and research. The IMLS recently released a study, Museums in the 21st Century, that outlines the ways in which museums need to adapt and change in the coming years to meet a changing society (due to advances in technology, communication, education, and so on). They indicate how museums can be used by community members for a variety of purposes; some examples include: learning and innovation skills, information and technology skills, life and career skills, and various themes including global awareness, the environment, and civic engagement (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2009, p. 3).

However, given the recent agenda shifts in education to include addressing the importance of early childhood education, it seems as though an area that needs to be approached is how younger generations can use museums as a resource, specifically this uniquely developing group. It will be increasingly important for museums to cultivate new audiences, and as the above information has indicated, reaching new audiences while they are still developing their sense of the world is critical. The study done by the Center for the Future of Museums discussed earlier emphasizes the importance of early exposure to museums in cultivating the next generation of museum-goers. This coincides with the above aforementioned research that advocates for early and repeat-exposure to ideas and new experiences at a young age and the impact they can have not only the life of a child, but also for the future of cultural institutions. This study examines the ways in which museums can provide these positive experiences for early learners and should be examined carefully by museum professionals in order to consider their potential
audiences. Knowing that early education is part of the changing educational agenda is vital when considering not only programming but also the funding museums receive.

**Parallels Between Early Childhood Education and Museum Education.**

Researching early childhood education and museum education simultaneously, it becomes increasingly obvious that the direction of museum education toward a more inquiry-based, hands-on, constructivist methodology shares many parallels with existing early childhood education pedagogies. Much in the way that Montessori revolutionized early childhood environments, and Piaget recognized the importance of social interactions and play, museums are paving the way for progressive and alternative approaches to education. In Washington D.C., The Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center, an early learning center that uses the resources of the Smithsonian Institution to compliment and guide its curriculum, has already recognized the parallels between museums and early childhood education. They advocate for the use of museums as an extension of the classroom for this age group. However, they also argue that schools can be more like museums in using objects to aid children’s learning (Schaefer, 2008). This is an important declaration and implies that both areas can learn a lot from one another. Museum education, while becoming more inquiry-based in many institutions, can look to early childhood models for ways to engage visitors of all ages. In addition, early childhood education can look to museums for ways to engage objects, use them to tell stories, explore new ideas, and discover new possibilities. The two disciplines already have so much in common, that it would be a waste to ignore the possibilities of using museums to not only to expand children’s minds, but also to expand museums audiences and push the practice of museum education forward.
It is this exchange of ideas and pedagogies, and these elements that are common to both fields that are the basis for the following case studies. The commonalities that I have identified are the presence of play or real-life experiences, curiosity and inquiry, social and emotional development, and the environment. The following three case studies will explore these links as they relate to existing early childhood education programs in museums. By examining these various programs, it becomes clear that museums can easily adapt their current programming to meet the needs of early learners. While these programs are tailored for that age group, they don’t require too much additional effort or resources. These programs do, however, require attention to the needs of this age group. They cannot be approached the same way as older children. However, if museums take time to understand both the developmental needs of this age group as well as the potential they have for understanding and creating art, they can easily create meaningful programs that will benefit both the museum and the children. The following case studies demonstrate the ways in which museums approach this age group with sensitivity and respect.
Chapter 1: First Impressions: Stories and Art at the Guggenheim

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City is part of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation that “collects, preserves, and interprets modern and contemporary art, and explores ideas across cultures through dynamic curatorial and educational initiatives and collaborations” (The Guggenheim Museum Mission Statement, n.d.). There are several locations of the Guggenheim throughout the world, including Venice, Bilbao, and most recently Abu Dhabi. Founded on a collection of early modern masterpieces, the New York location is an internationally renowned art museum that is almost as well known for its collection as it is for its architectural attributes (The Guggenheim Museum History, n.d).

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation was founded in 1937, and it opened the Museum of Non-Objective Painting in 1939, its first New York–based venue for the display of art (The Guggenheim History and Founding, n.d.). When the museum was in need of a permanent building to house its growing collection, the director Hilla Rebay approached architect Frank Lloyd Wright to design a building. The building opened in 1959, several months after Wright had passed away. It quickly became an iconic landmark of New York City architecture; its white circular façade offering a stark contrast to the surrounding geometrically shaped buildings. The museum continues to showcase modern and contemporary works and has a strong focus on education and international collaborations.

The Guggenheim Museum is a leader in the inquiry-based method for looking at art, offering a variety of programs for children and adults to look at and discuss art. Tours at the Guggenheim are facilitated by museum educators and are “designed to foster active
learning and engage students in careful observation and the development of language and critical-thinking skills” (The Guggenheim Museum Education Programs, n.d.). Tours are offered with a thematic approach and are aimed at engaging students in lively discussions and activities such as drawing, writing, and movement in response to the works of art that they encounter in the tour. In addition to these tours offered for grades 2-12, the Guggenheim has also developed an early childhood program designed for students in pre-K through first grade called First Impressions: Stories and Art at the Guggenheim. This is a multi-visit program that consists of a pre-visit to the classroom by a museum educator, a visit to the museum, and a post-visit back to the classroom. This program allows for “deep thematic investigations” of the museum’s exhibitions in connection with the young students’ personal lives (The Guggenheim Museum First Impressions, n.d).

Each program approaches a specific topic that runs through the three sessions. Consequently, students are able to “build visual literacy, critical thinking, and language skills” (The Guggenheim Museum First Impressions, n.d.). In addition, one of the goals of the program is to introduce these young learners to the museum, and help them build a personal relationship with the museum and its art, reflecting the American Alliance of Museum’s findings that children who are exposed to museums early in their lives grow up to be museum advocates (Merrit, 2008).

For this case study, I observed a guided tour for a pre-K class on March 12, 2013, that lasted for one hour. The group had previously received a visit from the museum educator to their classroom during which the theme of “play” that would run throughout the duration of the program was introduced, along with the history of the museum, some activities, and an introduction to some of the artwork that would be part of their museum
tour. I chose this museum because of its strong history with the use of the inquiry-based method. The pre-K class was divided among three educators, creating groups of 7-8 children each; I observed one of these groups, as they all happened simultaneously. I stayed with this group for the duration of the tour and had the opportunity to ask the museum educator questions following the tour.

I observed this session in order to identify how, if at all, the inquiry-based approach was modified for younger learners, how play and real-life experiences were incorporated into the tour, and what attempts were made to foster social and emotional development. My findings are organized below into the following sections: the Inquiry-Based Approach with Early Childhood students, Play and Real-Life Experiences, and Social and Emotional Development. Each section examines these topics with the aforementioned theories and writings in mind, while identifying best practices for engaging young learners in a gallery experience. The concluding part of the chapter examines what can be learned from the Guggenheim’s approach and applied to other museums.

**Inquiry-Based Approach with Early Childhood Students**

The inquiry-based method of looking at and discussing art has been a growing trend in museums and has been gaining attention for its ability to engage students in meaningful conversations about a variety of topics and to spark their curiosities. This methodology of carefully looking at a work of art and answering meaningful and relevant questions is especially important to consider when designing tours for early childhood students, as they are naturally curious and eager to share their own experiences. The
inquiry process begins with observations, giving individuals enough time to take in a work of art and look carefully. From the moment the children entered the Guggenheim Museum, they were engaging in an inquiry-based tour, filled with questions and hands-on activities to engage multiple ways of learning. Before looking at any works of art, the group was asked to make observations about the space, specifically the shapes that they saw. Rather than looking at a specific work of art and asking questions, the museum educator asked the group to look for the different shapes they could see around the museum from where they were sitting inside the base of the rotunda. Many of them eagerly answered. “I see an oval,” one child said. “I see a square,” responded another child. This went on until they had pointed out several shapes, from simple shapes like squares and circles, to more complex shapes like trapezoids. This activity immediately set the stage for the inquiry that was going to take place throughout the museum and introduced the children to this new and unique space in a playful and interactive way.

The types of questions that the museum educator asked about each artwork are particularly important to this study. When looking at specific works of art, the museum educator always started by asking an observational question such as, “What do we see here?” “Take a look at this image, look up and down, and left to right,” is another example of the educator directing the group to make observations while also reminding them to look at the entire work. In addition, she invited the group to, “take a closer look” several times, followed by the above “What do we see here?” question. These are all examples of the observation questions that Herz discussed as seen above, that open up the discussion by having the children think about what they are seeing. Herz argued that children should spend time looking at an image and “articulating what they see before
they begin to contemplate what they think it means” (Herz, 2010, p. 28). This simple question is open-ended and allows for multiple responses, as was demonstrated in this tour multiple times.

These straight-forward observation questions elicited a myriad of responses from the children (and even from some of the adult chaperones who were on the trip). For example, when looking at a set of two paintings, both made by using paint and glue, the children were asked to take a closer look at the pair, one child said, “That looks like an egg in a pan.” Building upon this statement another child added, “That looks like an egg in a pot that’s white.” One more child added, “This one looks like a light bulb.” Students shared their observations in response to the prompt while also making connections between what they were seeing (the paintings made with glue) and their own experiences with objects such as eggs cooking or light bulbs. They filtered these abstract images through their own body of knowledge, making sense of them before sharing their observations with the group.

In addition to asking these initial observational questions, the museum educator also asked several compare and contrast questions, giving the students an opportunity to identify similarities and differences between two pieces. This was done with the two “egg” pieces described above. She asked the children to comment on how the two pieces were similar. One child responded, “They both have circles, but one is big and one is little.” Another child said, “That line has black, that outline is white.” This question took their observations one step further, allowing students to draw comparisons between two pieces and make additional connections and interpretations. They commented on the shapes and the colors in relationship to one another, demonstrating their evolving critical
thinking skills.

Another example of the power of asking a comparison question was when the children compared a piece that was a woman’s dress made out of light bulbs that actually lit up every few minutes, with an accompanying painting done by the artist. This painting was an abstract representation of the dress. The museum educator asked the children to compare the painting with the dress. Despite the mediums being very different, the children were extremely perceptive in noticing the similarities. One child said that the circles in the painting “look like the light bulbs,” while another said that the lines in the painting “are skinny light bulbs.” One child even commented that those lines looked like the subway lines, relating what he was seeing to what he sees in his own life. The children were able to demonstrate their ability to categorize and label things as well as their ability to use their developing descriptive language skills. These simple compare and contrast questions utilized several modes of thinking simultaneously and allowed children to draw their examples from evidence found within the works themselves, showing their beginning reasoning and critical thinking skills.

Once the children had observed and discussed what they saw in each object, they were presented with a question that invited them to think more deeply about the piece. These interpretive questions asked the children what they think, rather than telling them what the interpretation of the piece is or should be. The questions were open-ended and lacked a right or wrong response. The children took on the role of the art-historian or investigator, and were required to ask themselves questions and figure out the answers based on evidence in the work and their own experiences. For example, the educator asked the children whether or not the artist “made the piece fast or slowly.” Sometimes
the questions even came from the children, who showed their level of comfort in making inquires themselves within this setting. For instance, one child asked, “how did she take it off?” referring to the light bulb dress they were looking at. The museum educator turned this question around to the child asking the group, “What do you think?” This allowed them to thinking about what it would be like to wear that dress and how it might be taken on and off. These questions allow students to place themselves in the role of the artist while also working their problem solving skills using their growing imaginations.

Taking the discussions a little bit deeper, the museum educator utilized questions that recalled the children’s personal experiences. These questions directly related what the children were seeing to what they had experienced in their own lives, following observational questions. The museum educator also related these experiences to the contextual work about the artist or artwork that the group was looking at. For instance, when looking at the “egg piece” made out of glue, she asked the group, “Have you ever played with glue before?” She explained that the artist wanted to play with glue because it was something that was new to the country at the time and they were really excited to play with it. The children described their experiences with glue and what they used it for while continuing to look at what the artists had made with glue. Another way the educator called on their personal experiences and feelings was by asking the children how they thought it would feel to run through 27 pieces of paper, as one artist did for a performance piece. One child answered that he thought it would be hard. Another said it would feel “great” because he likes kicking. This revealed their creativity and allowed them to think about what it would feel like while also having them recall previous experiences (such as, what it feels like to kick things, or walk into things).
The Use of Play and Real-Life Experiences in the Gallery

The above question of what it would feel like to run through 27 pieces of paper may have gotten the children to think about how it would feel, but the following activity actually allowed them to experience it. After asking the children what they thought was happening in the photograph of a man running through large sheets of paper, and what it might feel like to do so, the museum educator then invited them to try it. She brought out a piece of paper and asked one of the teachers to try it first while the children watched, stating, “let’s see the adults play,” recalling the theme of the tour and reinforcing that concept for the students. The educator then invited the children to try, giving parameters and instructions on where to stop so that it would be a safe activity to do within the gallery. Three children tried it, mimicking what the artist had done and experiencing it for themselves, an important component to early childhood learning as advocated by many of the theorists discussed above. The museum educator then asked them recall how it felt. One child responded that it “was worse than going through a wall.” The educator then took the opportunity to relate that feeling back to the artwork calling the children’s attention to the fact that the artist collapsed at the end of the performance and connecting that to how the children felt after trying to go through only one piece of paper.

The above hands-on experiences exemplified the writings of Dewey, Montessori, and Piaget and others, regarding how children learn best and what educators can do to offer these playful yet meaningful learning opportunities. Not only were they able to experience running through a piece of paper, they were able to put themselves in the role of the artist, experiencing something similar to them and connecting to the artwork in a different way. In addition, it appealed to the multiple ways children learn, as emphasized
by the writings of Howard Gardner. This type of movement activity was an important demonstration of how children develop kinesthetic intelligence.

**Discussing Art as a Way of Fostering Social and Emotional Development**

By dividing the class into three small groups, the educators were able to engage the children in observations, discussions, and activities. It also allowed the group to work together, building from one another’s ideas, interpretations, and actions. Because of the nature of inquiry-based discussions being open-ended, the children were encouraged to share their thoughts and opinions from the beginning, as we saw demonstrated above with the shape-finding exercise. By developing a safe-space for dialogues to occur, the children were invited to share and therefore construct knowledge and meaning as a group, as promoted by Hein and Freire. The first piece the children looked at was a large canvas that had been written all over. It had crayons hanging down that were intended for the audience to use and add to the existing piece. The children were invited to take turns drawing and scribbling on the canvas. This experience provided the group with a familiar activity to engage in at the start of the tour that also related back to the theme of play. This helped to create that nurturing environment that is often found in early childhood classrooms but may get lost in a new and unique environment such as the Guggenheim Museum.

Providing an opportunity for a collaborative hands-on activity, the educator invited the class to recreate a painting they were exploring together. She asked the children to say what color colored pencil they had and asked the group who should draw first. This not only forced them to look at the painting carefully, but also to make
decisions and problem solve by putting themselves in the role of the artist. They pointed out the colors that they saw in the painting and then discussed who should go next. Children had a chance to scribble on the paper, modeling their movements after what they saw in the artwork. The children were working collaboratively, sharing their ideas. One little girl stated, “I should go last.” “Why?” the museum educator asked. “Because I have black,” the little girl answered, explaining that there were a lot of black scribbles in the painting. One boy responded by saying, “she is going to have to go for a long time to make all that black,” offering her a suggestion on how to color to make their picture look similar to the one on the wall. This demonstrated the power that comes from experiential learning and how children can work together to create something, helping each other and offering their ideas in a safe space. In addition, it also exemplified the social and emotional component of hands-on experiences that are carried out collaboratively. Not only did the children have an opportunity to create artwork themselves, they also had the opportunity to create something together with everyone’s input.

The hands-on experience mentioned above, along with the inquiry-based methodology of this tour, combined to help foster social and emotional development within the group. The collaborative nature of the project allowed the students to work together, reflecting the crucial element of group learning as discussed by the Creative Curriculum. This group learning is also achieved by the conversations that arose from the questions being asked of the children. Despite their limited life experiences due to their young age, the children connected what they saw and what others saw with their own experiences, helping to build a larger body of knowledge. This was then reinforced through hands-on activities that gave the children another mode through which to
understand the world around them.

**Conclusion**

The Guggenheim’s *First Impressions* program provided an example of how inquiry can help foster social and emotional development, critical thinking skills, and problem solving abilities. The questions asked including, “What do you see?” “How does that make you feel?” and so on, provided an example of how to approach inquiry with young children. However, it didn’t appear to differ from the inquiry that would be used with older children or even adults. The process, as explained by Herz, begins with the same types of observation questions, leading to more interpretive questions. While the language may have been slightly different to meet the vocabulary and developmental processes of the young children, it remained largely the same. Tours with older students typically begin with, “What do you see?” or some derivative thereof. This then begs the question, why don’t more museums offer programs for this age group? If they are already employing an inquiry-based method, based on the outcomes of this tour, that method shouldn’t need to be altered very much to meet the needs of younger museum-goers.

The recurring hands-on activities, however, were unique to this age group, providing numerous opportunities for the children to move and draw, keeping their growing bodies active while also providing time for quiet reflections in front of the artworks. Not only did these activities keep the children engaged, they also helped them to consider the artwork, placing themselves in the role of the artist and providing the real-life experience that is so critical for developing minds.
Chapter 2: The Yak Packers Program at the Rubin Museum of Art

The Rubin Museum of Art is relatively new to the New York City museum landscape. It opened its doors in October of 2004, providing a new space to house a “comprehensive collection of art from the Himalayas and surrounding regions including paintings, sculptures, and textiles” (Rubin Museum of Art About Us, n.d.). Through changing exhibitions and a wide array of public programs, the museum offers opportunities to explore the artistic legacy of the Himalayan region and to appreciate its place in the context of world cultures and canon of art history. The Rubin places an emphasis on the viewer when organizing exhibitions, with the goal of assisting viewers who are new to Himalayan art.

Defining itself by both an inclusive mission statement and a listing of values, the Rubin Museum is, “a dynamic environment that stimulates learning, promotes understanding, and inspires personal connections to the ideas, cultures, and art of Himalayan Asia” (Rubin Museum of Art About Us, n.d.). Along with this mission, the museum emphasizes its core values of access, engagement, creativity, and scholarship. The core value is the focus on the visitor’s experience, using its collection of art and objects to spark dialogues and connections between visitors and the art and culture presented. This mission and set of values is reflected in the Rubin’s education programs, which include opportunities for teens, families, school groups, university students, educators, and adults to experience the Rubin’s extensive collection of art from the Himalayas and surrounding region.

I chose the Rubin Museum’s programs for this study based on the culturally specific nature of its collection, with the goal of examining how, if at all, this is
approached for an early childhood audience. Among its many education programs, the Rubin offers two programs designed to meet the needs of early childhood aged children. The first is the preschool group tours that are offered in a variety of themes for groups of children ages 3-6 years old. These programs include an introduction to the museum, a 20-minute gallery exploration, and a 30-minute art-making activity followed by a “wrap up” and goodbye.

The second program offered is for children ages 2-4 years and their adult caregivers. The *Yak Packers* program is the focus of this case study. The *Yak Packers* program presents a unique opportunity to see how museums approach family learning in an organized, weekly, drop-in setting. I will explore this adult/child early childhood program, focusing on how it addresses issues of social and emotional development, play, and environment. I hope it will provide direction for creating the best practices for early childhood museum program development.

The *Yak Packers* program has an interesting structure. It is a drop-in program open to parents and caregivers with children ages 2-4 years. It happens weekly on both Wednesday and Thursday mornings from 10:30-11:30 a.m., each with a different theme (some themes include shapes, lines, patters, colors, and so on). The sessions are broken down into four parts: community building, story time, a gallery visit, and art making. The community-building portion begins the program and consists of free-play time for the children as they enter the education center room. A variety of activities are offered to them including various games and opportunities to explore blocks, magnets, and other objects related to the day’s theme. Children and their caregivers are then invited to clean up and join in the “story time” part of the visit where an educator reads an interactive
story to the group. Everyone then gathers to head out to the galleries and explore them together according to the day’s theme. The final section then occurs back in the education center. This allows children to explore an artwork or craft project also based on the day’s theme.

I observed this program on Thursday, March 7, 2013. The theme for this particular class was “lines.” I paid close attention to 1. how the adults and children were engaged by the educators, 2. the environment that was created for the program, and 3. how the educators approached a culturally specific collection of art and objects in the galleries. There was one lead educator present to run the program and one intern assisting her.

My findings are organized according to the program design and elements that I was investigating: the Museum Environment, Elements of Play in the Museum, and Social and Emotional Development: Story Time and the Adult Presence in the Classroom, followed by a concluding section that summarizes the best practices gleaned from observing this program.

**The Museum Environment**

The program began in a classroom at the education center of the Rubin (this is located roughly half a block away from the museum itself). Because a majority of the program actually occurs in this room, it is important to examine the environment that was created from the perspective of the theories previously discussed. I specifically focused on the following questions: Was the atmosphere calm and welcoming? Was the room designed to be age-appropriate? Were children given objects and tools that were age-
appropriate? Were objects made readily available for them? Through careful observation, I was able to see how the set up of the room impacted the activities that were planned and how the children responded to this space. These questions relate to Montessori, Dewey, and Vygotsky’s theories on early childhood environments, which place the child in the center of the learning experience.

Through careful observation, I was able to see how the set up of the classroom impacted the activities that were planned and how the children responded to the space. When the children and their caregivers entered the room, there was music playing. Each child was greeted by the museum educators and given a nametag. After this brief interaction, they were invited in to select an activity of their choice. The room was set up to help children choose what they would like to play with. This was done so through the design of the furniture and the placement of the manipulative objects. The furniture was all at the children’s level. Tables were small and low to the ground, allowing all of the children, regardless of their differences in age or height, access to the materials present on the tables. This adheres to the precedent set by Montessori as to the need for child-sized furniture and tools to optimize children’s opportunities to explore.

In addition to the low tables, pillows, rather than chairs, surrounded the tables. The group included from 2 years to 4 years olds, all of whom were different heights with different capabilities. The pillows allowed each of them to use the table effectively as the younger children stood on the pillows around the table, while the older children sat on the pillows and were still able to reach.

These tables were set up on one side of the room while across the room there was a large carpeted area with big pillows around its perimeter. Inside this area the carpet
was filled with magnet blocks. All of the children had access to these blocks and many of them played near each other on the carpet with them. The parents and caregivers could then sit around the outside on the pillows provided and interact with the children or each other. Both areas provided space for children to interact with each other and with the toys and objects that were present in the room.

One of the primary concerns for early childhood learning experiences is that children are given access to tools, objects, and toys that are appropriate for their age. In addition, according to Montessori and others, it is critical that these objects be stored and kept in places where children can easily get them independently as well as put them away. This puts the children in control of the environment around them as it allows them to choose from a variety of items.

The children in the *Yak Packers* program were given a variety of objects to play with, all of which were age appropriate and related to the theme of “lines.” On one table there were light boxes with flat, transparent, line blocks in various shapes that could be stacked on top of one another or put together to form new shapes and colors on top of the light box. On the other table, there were foam blocks in different shapes and colors and foam animals to play with. Large pillows were set up around the edge of a large carpet on the opposite side of the room. This is the area that would also become the story time location. There were magnet blocks spread out on the carpet; they were different sizes, shapes and colors.

Again, the organization of materials allowed children to easily choose what they wanted to play with. There was plenty of room at each station for all children to play and interact. Even when it was time to clean up, children were capable of helping because
there were separate bins on the floor in which each of the objects could be placed. This gave the children further control over the environment and allowed them to assist in the clean up process.

**Elements of Play in the Museum**

When the children arrive for the program with their caregivers, they are invited into the room and told that they have 15 minutes of free-play time. During this time, children were allowed to choose from any of the above toys, organized throughout the room. In addition to the toys laid out, there was also a small bookshelf stocked with various picture books that children could access. Many of the youngest children went straight over to the block tables, moving between the two tables, carrying blocks with them, providing an example of how children’s interests can guide their learning. Some of the older children of the group played on the carpet side-by-side with the magnet blocks.

Not only did this time allow for uninterrupted play, as research has shown is an important learning tool, but also allowed children the opportunity to ease into the environment. They were not forced to interact with one another, but instead were able to play, either independently or together, in a welcoming and safe environment. Allowing children to work side by side with similar and different materials helped them to develop the necessary skills to play together when they grow.

While the children were playing, the educators circulated throughout the room, engaging both the children and their caregivers and reinforcing the theme. The educators interacted with the children without intruding on the playful “work” they were doing, while helping to set the tone for the remainder of the session. This functioned to build
trust between the children and the educators, as Erikson claimed was so vital in helping young children learn.

The Yak Packers program also offers children an opportunity to participate in a hands-on activity as the last part of the session. This activity could range from an art-making activity to exploring a material or object in-depth, depending on the day. For this session, children were each given a tray of colored sand. They were then given the opportunity to explore the material and make lines in it, referring back to the theme of the day. Like the free-play portion of the day, this activity was also left open-ended. The museum educator introduced the topic by saying, “Think about what we’ve been talking about. Who saw lines in the artworks?” Most of the children raised their hands. She then explained that they were going to be making lines of their own in trays of sand. She demonstrated how to do so by modeling it in front of the class, explaining that they could make many different kinds of lines in the sand and could even mix the colors of sand together to make new lines and shapes. Each child received his or her own tray of sand to explore.

Because the above activity was open-ended, different techniques emerged from different children, although, some children made the same lines and motions. A large majority of children did the exact same swirling motion in the sand, simply moving one finger through the sand in a continuous swirl over and over again. This begged the question, is there a correlation between this activity and a developmental stage?

According to Zero to Three: the National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and their Families, between the ages of 19 and 25 months, children begin to scribble more if given crayons or other writing utensils. Research shows that between the ages of two and three
years, which a majority of the children present were, children develop better control over the muscles in their hands and fingers than younger children have. Their scribbles then begin to change and become more controlled. Toddlers may make repeated marks on the page, called “controlled scribbling,” creating open circles, and diagonal, curved, horizontal or vertical lines (Zero to Three, n.d.).

There seemed to be a correlation between what children of this age are able to draw and how they reacted to the trays of sand, making similar shapes using just their hands. Two of the older children (both girls around the age of four) pushed one finger from one end to the other and then put their whole hand in the sand, pushing it from one side of the tray to the other. Their palms demonstrated similar patterns of experimentation. Even one of the youngest girls remained focused on the sand, paying attention to help clean it up when it fell off the tray. Some wrote their names at one parent’s suggestion. This activity demonstrated how children explore materials in many different ways given only a simple set of open-ended instructions and an opportunity for open-ended free play time, as research has suggested.

**Social and Emotional Development: Story time and the Adult Presence in the Classroom**

As discussed previously in the writings of Erikson and Piaget, social and emotional development is a critical part of early childhood education. Erikson places emphasis on trust, a key component in the earliest years of one’s life, and the role adults play in ensuring that children feel safe and trust the adults around them. The presence of adults in this program was imperative for this age group to help them gain confidence and
trust in the museum environment. The museum educators not only engaged the children, but also sought to engage the adults and encourage them to have direct contact and communication with the children they were with by modeling appropriate interactions and setting an example of how to engage with children in this type of setting.

According to the lead educator, one of the primary goals of this program is to provide appropriate museum tools and modeling to the adults in the group so that they can then actively engage the children they are accompanying. Another goal is to get children to feel comfortable in the museum, and to teach them how to behave while inside. Despite the short amount of time actually spent in the museum, the fact that this program allowed the adult caregivers the opportunity to lead the children around built on the trust that already existed within that relationship. It additionally helped to make those children feel safe and comfortable in a new and different environment.

Conclusion

The Rubin Museum’s *Yak Packers* program provided an example of an early childhood educational program that has an adult component, giving this study an added element of best practices to consider. The presence of an adult caregiver allowed the youngest children, many of whom had not been in museums before, to have a sense of trust and familiarity in a new environment. This is one way museums can provide a safe space for learning. If there is no trust established and children feel uncomfortable in a space, a positive learning experience is harder to achieve. As the museum educator stated, the goals of this program include not only giving the children a positive early museum experience, but also to modeling for parents and caregivers how to interact with
their children in a cultural institution in a meaningful and engaging way. This attention to the social and emotional development of a child is critical to consider when designing programs for this age group.

The opportunities for free play within a safe and age-appropriate environment adhered to the principles of early childhood pedagogies and demonstrated the limitless ways children can engage with objects if they are given the freedom to follow their curiosities. While the education center at the Rubin Museum was set up in a developmentally appropriate way, the visit to the actual museum space could be improved upon. Given that many of these children have not been to the museum before, and their ages dictate their short attention spans, this portion of the visit was appropriately short. However, it was also unstructured. The short duration of the museum visit may adhere to the above arguments that letting children guide their learning is important, however it failed to provide an adequate modeling opportunity for how to look at art. During that portion of the program, the group broke up into smaller, informal groups, most of which consisted of just the child and their caregiver. Only a few families remained with the educators. The rest wandered around the small exhibition very quickly, darting from one image to the next, and not allowing much time for the children or adults to look closely at the works. As the Guggenheim case study demonstrated, children are eager to discuss artworks, even if their vocabulary is still growing. Keeping the group together and leading an inquiry about one or two pieces might have provided an additional layer of depth to the program. It also would give the adults an example of how to engage children in looking at works of art.
In addition, one reason that the Rubin Museum was included this study is to provide the perspective of a culturally specific institution. This choice intended to demonstrate how museum educators approach a collection of objects from a particular region of the world and how that can help young children build their bodies of knowledge. Unfortunately, the educators did not address this other than when they told the children that they were at the Rubin Museum of Art. This may have been a missed opportunity to engage students in looking at a map of where the Himalayan region is, or looking at the word “Himalaya” as a way to connect text and language development. Even if they cannot read or understand a map, it exposes them to new information upon which they can build upon later in their academic careers. The children could have danced to music from that culture, or looked at images of what that region looks like. While it is difficult to engage such young learners in a lengthy discussion, the above body of research has shown that visuals combined with activities that engage the senses, can help children to interpret and learn new information, filtering it through their existing knowledge.
Chapter 3: The PhD of WEE Arts at the Children’s Museum of Art

Started in 1988 by Kate Schneider, the Children’s Museum of Art (CMA) is a nonprofit institution that employees teaching artists to work directly with students and families and is located in the SoHo neighborhood of New York City. The mission of the CMA is to “extend the benefits of the arts to all children and their communities and to secure the future of arts by inspiring and championing the next generations of artists and art lovers” (Children’s Museum of Art Mission Statement, n.d.). The CMA thus provides authentic hands-on art experiences for children with artists, both in and outside the museum, as well as collecting and displaying children’s art. They celebrate the “artist in every child” and are committed to this goal regardless of the ability or socioeconomic status of the child (The Children’s Museum of Art About Us, n.d.). Much like the research above has demonstrated, the CMA also believes that the arts are “critical to child and youth development” and extends that to a strong and vibrant surrounding community.

Their philosophy involves providing children and their families access to art materials and creative tools for self-expression through the visual and performing arts (The Children’s Museum of Art About Us, n.d.). The museum employs working artists to lead their programs who not only teach them about materials and processes, but also serve as role models for artistic expression. Like the philosophies of Erikson and others mentioned above, the role of art, for CMA also provides a possibility for social-emotional growth, specifically, to build self-esteem in children. For the past 25 years, these artists have been working with children, encouraging them to explore their identities through hands-on art making practices. Currently on display is Face to Face, an exhibition that celebrates the self-portraits of children from 50 countries that are found in the museum’s
permanent collection, dating back to the 1930s. Accompanying this exhibition, in an effort to engage visitors, there are several interactive stations set up throughout the galleries to encourage visitors to create their own self-portraits, both in traditional ways as well as with new media. This exhibition not only honors the permanent collection of the museum, which dates to the 1930s and houses over 2000 works by children from around the world, but also reflects the museum’s commitment to providing hands-on art making activities to families and children who visit the museum in an effort to engage their imaginations.

While CMA has an all-inclusive approach to education, this case study specifically examines the WEE Arts program, a hands-on experience designed for children under 5 years old. This program seeks to develop a “child’s familiarity with art making and encourage experimentation, exploration, and creative thinking” (The Children’s Museum of Art WEE Arts, n.d.). It consists of a multisensory session that also fosters the development of gross and fine motor skills in addition to socialization and self-expression. Families have the option of participating in registered classes, drop-in sessions, and general open hours. The registered classes provide children with regular, weekly arts sessions. These small classes (capped at 15 students) allow children to get to know each other, and are intended to foster a sense of community. The drop-in sessions allow children to come to classes without having to preregister, and invites parents and caregivers to participate and model learning with the children as they play with materials such as play dough, paint, and chalk. Finally, the open-studio runs age-appropriate programming daily, including programs that are less structured than the classes, but still allow for families to explore art materials in an open-ended approach. Teaching artists
stand by to help with projects and lead music and story times for participants. The *WEE Arts* program is offered for three different age groups: 1 year to 2 years 10 months old, 2 years 10 months to 3 years 10 months old, and 3 years 10 months to 5 years old.

For this case study, I observed the PhD of WEE, a program designed for children ages 3 years 10 months to 5 years old, that is offered 3 afternoons a week from 4:00pm until 5:15pm. This class “features some familiar materials from the general WEE Arts program and introduces new materials through projects that require more fine motor skills” (The Children’s Museum of Art WEE Arts, n.d.). In addition to these new materials, children also explore the ideas of textures, lines, and colors. I chose this particular group to examine how an arts-based museum approaches art-making with young children. Specifically, I looked at how the environment was set up to foster creativity, how play was incorporated into the sessions, and how social and emotional development was advanced. I have organized my findings into the following sections: An Arts Rich Environment, Art and Play, and Social and Emotional Development in Small Groups.

**An Arts Rich Environment**

The Children’s Museum of Art not only has a tremendous gallery space filled with children’s artwork, but also has state-of-the-art studios that provide spaces to engage with materials in new ways and inspire creativity. There are also spaces to crawl, jump, climb, and relax, with large blocks, ball pits, ramps, and soft cushions to sit on. These spaces allow children to move freely and develop their gross motor skills, but they also create a child-friendly atmosphere and send a message that this space was designed for
them (see image number 1 of the ball pit area). From the moment children enter the space, they are surrounded with artwork that was created by other children, furniture and play areas designed with children in mind, and art labs filled with new and exciting materials, much like the art-rich environments that are at the center of the Reggio Emilia model for early childhood education discussed above. The set up of the environment reflects developmentally appropriate practices for young children as outlined by Colbert and Taunton who argue that children need many opportunities to create art, look at and talk about art, and become aware of art in their everyday lives (as cited in Schiller, 1995, p. 47). This is a central component of the Reggio Emilia approach and is exemplified in the CMA learning environment.

The WEE Arts program takes place in a room designed for their age group. Much like a Montessori classroom, the furniture is age and size-appropriate. This can be in the photo labeled number 2 that was taken looking into the room from its upper level. The tables are at an appropriate level for the students to either stand or sit around; there is plenty of room for movement throughout the space; and ample space to build in or sit on the floor as a group. The walls are covered with various art projects that had been made by participants throughout the years. This provides an arts-rich environment, as described by the Reggio Emilia curriculum as being central to children’s learning as they are exposed to how others use various mediums to express themselves and experiment.

While the furniture is age-appropriate and the room provides a sensory-rich environment, the WEE Arts program for this age group limits the materials that the children can play with. As mentioned above, the Montessori curriculum ensures that all materials are kept accessible to the children and are clearly labeled for easy access.
Children are thus encouraged to play with a variety of objects of their choice. In this program however, the children choose from materials that have been preselected and provided by the educators. For example, on the day I observed, when the children first arrived in the classroom, they were instructed to gather around one table together (there were only 5 of them) and were each given a piece of Model Magic clay to play with. The teachers sat with them and also played with the Model Magic while interacting with the children, discussing their artwork and the process of what they were doing. They additionally talked about topics of interest to the children, for example, what the children had done that day, the weather, and so on. One of the educators asked, “What colors do you see?” referring to the model magic they had given them. The other told the children that she was going to “make a face with it.” While the children weren’t given free rein to choose the objects that they wanted to play with, the activity was left open-ended, allowing the children to explore the material they were given and create whatever their imaginations could render.

The set up of the program and environment recalls the centers-based and small-group approaches of the Creative Curriculum that gives children the opportunity to explore materials in various areas throughout the room. The difference between this and the Montessori method is that the teachers set out the materials for the children to explore, rather than having them readily available in the classroom. Children then participate both in free-play at certain times of the day as well as small or large group activities. This program models that small and large group activity time, and involves setting out different materials for the children to interact with as a group. As mentioned above, children were invited to play with Model Magic clay for the first few minutes of
class, as they built a rapport with one another and explored what the material could do in an open-ended way. They then moved to the next activity as a group and were invited to sit on the carpet and draw with a variety of writing utensils including pencils, markers, and oil pastels. The museum educators instructed them to use any of these materials to draw anything that came to mind. The ways in which the children used the materials revealed their age and developmental levels as well as fine motor skills. For instance, one little boy scribbled in continuing circles and all over the paper with one color, making an abstract, indistinguishable shape. However, one of the other boys created recognizable shapes, largely by copying the drawing that the teacher was creating of a sun and a ladder. He chose the same colors and materials and watched her closely to recreate what she was making. Towards the end, he began to add some of his own elements into the drawing. This was an opportunity for the children to create and draw anything that they wanted, while also exploring the different drawing materials. Most of the boys only used markers. But even within this limited material, they experimented with how it was used in many ways. An example of this occurred when one boy started out scribbling both lines and circles but then began poking the paper with the marker to make dots. When he poked the paper too hard, it ripped. He then went back to more gentle marks, not wanting to rip the paper any more.

Even with a limited number of materials, the possibilities for expression and exploration are limitless. Each child’s drawing was different and they told different stories about them. The open-ended nature of this activity contributed to the variety of responses.
In addition to the open-ended activities that were set by the boundaries of the materials provided, the museum educators also utilized the entire art studio, moving the children from area to area based on the projects they were doing and providing variety to keep the students interested and moving. They began at the table to work with clay, but then moved to the carpet to draw while sitting or lying down, based on the children’s preference. They then went up to the second level of the room to collage paintings after listening to a story about shapes on the carpet. The children present were four young boys with a lot of energy, and while changing the activities may have been enough to keep them engaged, moving around the room also helped to keep their attention and interest. It also allowed for individual, small group, and large group interactions to take place. For instance, while on the carpet drawing next to one another, two of the boys started drawing on each other’s papers in a playful way. They were able to do this easily because they were seated close together on the floor and they could easily move around. Many of them noticed and remarked on how different it was to work on the floor rather than at the table. One boy went so far as to complain, saying that it was “too hard” to work on the floor. Because he was getting so upset, the teachers allowed him to go to the table adjacent to the carpet so he would still be with the group. This time, rather than sitting at the table, he stood, again providing a slightly different experience and allowing him to feel comfortable in his environment.

**Art and Play**

Play, as described by Danko-McGee (2013) “involves finding connections between an artwork and the child by using tangible objects” (p. 22). From the time that
the children entered the art studio at the CMA, they were given tangible objects to
explore. First it was clay to mold, followed by drawing objects, and finally glue and
paper to collage with. This last set, the collage materials, directly connected to the book
that was read to the children right before they completed the activity. This helped them
to make connections between something they saw and something they could create
themselves. This idea was demonstrated when the museum educator read Ellen Stoll
Walsh’s picture book *Mouse Shapes*, a story about mice who are hiding from a cat by
making themselves into shapes and hiding behind blocks. The children were then invited
to make their own shapes by combining pieces of paper using a collage technique. The
educators left this part of the process open-ended as well, allowing the children to make
their own shapes and connections and explore how to layer and collage materials.

The children all described what they were making with their shapes. One child,
for example, stated, “look, I made skis!” Another child remarked, “I’m making a pizza.”
These associations between shapes and meanings is associated with Piaget’s symbolic or
representational play discussed earlier, in which children “acquire the ability to encode
their experiences in symbols and then begin to play with symbols and their
combinations” (Diamond, 2012, p. 2). This expression of representational play was also
evident when the children were describing the pictures they drew. One exclaimed, “I
drew a dinosaur” while another child said, “it’s a roller coaster” as he pointed to what he
had drawn.

The open-ended nature of these activities allowed the children to create their own
meaning from the materials they were given. The time allowed for them to share those
meanings was also important as it allowed them to put words to their visual
representations and share them openly with the group. As Diamond points out, imagination plays an important role in play activities as children attach meaning to objects, and in this case, their artwork. The child envisioning a roller coaster from scribbles on his paper, or skis from long, rectangular pieces of paper collaged together, demonstrates this connection between play and imagination, while also building language and storytelling skills.

**Social and Emotional Development and Small Group Interactions**

The combination of imagination, play, and small-group interactions help to foster social and emotional development. Because these sessions happen weekly and many of the children sign up to attend each week, they are developing relationships with one another and with the museum educators who lead the program. This relationship building is aided by the structure of the program and its design to do activities as a group. Children were encouraged to build their own objects, and make their own drawings, however, much like in the Creative Curriculum classrooms, they do these activities in a group. As they were working, children interacted with one another, and many of them talked to each other and examine each other’s work. Sometimes they were speaking about their work, while other times they were exploring the materials but discussing other topics instead. For instance, one child mentioned that he was four. Another boy quickly responded with “I’m four too!” This was part of their conversation while they were playing with the Model Magic mentioned above. When the children were sitting together, one child said, “I want to sit with him because he is my best friend!” This also
demonstrates the relationships that have been built throughout the duration of this program.

The children also interacted and spoke with the adults, forming trusting relationships with them, an essential part of the learning process according to Erikson as mentioned previously. For example, when drawing on the carpet together, one child asked the museum educator “What are you drawing, Katie?” He had been watching her draw and mimicking what she created. He listened as Katie told him what all of her shapes were and what she was making. She also asked the children to describe their work in exchange. Choosing her words carefully, she simply stated, “tell me about your drawing.” This allowed the children not only to describe what they were making or what they had made, but a bit about their processes as well. The museum educators always explained what they were doing and modeled for the children how to behave. The children, in turn, shared what they made with the educators and then with the entire group. This was the most evident when they were discussing their drawings. The educators had set time aside for each child to hold up their work and share with the group what they had made and describe the story about it. Examples of their varying stories include: “This is a drawing about the blue color, about that color.”; “This is a ladder, that’s just a sun.”; “This is a roller coaster, a broken roller coaster, tada!”; and “This is a thing I drewed, it is a telescope you can look through…” Allowing children to talk about their work is also an important component of making art with them as both validates their work and builds relationships between them. In addition, looking at, reflecting upon, and experiencing art teaches and refines perception, which then fosters critical thinking skills that should be started at an early age (Danko-McGhee, 2013, p. 22).
Conclusion

The *WEE Arts* program at the Children’s Museum of Art most closely resembles an early childhood education experience in a school, but places it in a museum setting instead with an emphasis on art making. It borrows from several theorists, combining some environmental techniques from both Montessori and Reggio Emilia in the design of its spaces. Having a child-centered environment that is rich in art-making materials and inspiration may seem like a simple concept. However, allowing children to feel comfortable and confident in a space provides a strong foundation for learning to take place. In addition, it provides ample opportunities for social and emotional growth through small and large group play as championed by the Creative Curriculum approach.

One observation of this program that struck me was the conversations that took place between the participants as they were making art. They discussed a wide variety of topics while playing with and exploring different materials, demonstrating the power of art to build relationships and provide a safe-space for learning to occur. Children were able to remain still, engaged, and concentrate on building with clay or drawing while also having conversations. Their own curiosity was guiding what they were doing and creating. While they were engaged in play, they were learning about each other and the environment, as well as the materials they were using. There was very little intervention by the museum educators in regard to what the children should or could do. They simply provided the materials and modeled some positive behaviors. The children were guiding the process within those set boundaries. It is therefore important to provide children with open-ended art-making experiences to allow them to explore materials while also
building relationships with one another and fostering their social and emotional development.

One aspect of this program that I think would warrant exploration is allowing some free-play time in the beginning of the session to allow the children to choose from a variety of materials. This would adhere to the CMA’s desire to provide new materials for children to explore while also allowing children to choose what those materials are and how they are used. As it is designed now, the children enter the room and are given only one material to explore as a group. Based on the writings of Montessori and others, having some free-play time before settling into a group activity, could empower children to follow their creativity and foster a sense of independence within a safe environment.
Conclusion

The opportunity for children to work in small groups to explore tangible artworks and objects in museum galleries, while exchanging their observations and interpretations, is a unique experience than cannot be replicated. The museum environment provides a safe space for learning to occur that is based on sparking curiosities and exploring new ideas as a group. Through guided tours and hands-on workshops led by trained museum educators, students are given the chance to experiment, play, and ask questions. These elements are not only important in museum education, but also vital in helping early childhood learners grow.

Based on the above case studies and theoretical research, it is evident that museums provide a perfect platform for meaningful and memorable learning experiences for early childhood learners. Museum education is not very different from early childhood education. Both seek to spark curiosities, provide an active and engaging environment, and provide ways for us to understand each other’s views by fostering social and emotional development.

The focuses of early childhood pedagogy are also shared by museum education, offering suggestions as to how museums can meet the needs of this age group of learners. Based on my research, art museum education programs for early learners should foster social and emotional development through inquiry-based discussions of artwork and objects. This allows children to exchange ideas and gain a better understanding of one another. Children’s knowledge is thus constructed socially in a hands-on way as championed by Piaget, Erikson, and others. In order to feed children’s curiosity, educators should expose them to a variety of new objects, asking them to take on the role
of interpreter. New objects and artworks enter museums all the time, providing new opportunities for discussions and observations to be made. This constantly changing environment, if designed to be developmentally appropriate, can foster experimentation. This includes both the physical environment of the museum as well as the social environment that the museum educator helps to create.

In a time where preschool education is finally beginning to be discussed on a national level, being mentioned by President Obama in many speeches, or part of the agenda for the Institute of Museum and Library Services, it is vital that museums explore the ways in which they can be identified as a resource for preschool populations. And yet, many museums shy away from this growing age group, too afraid that they will touch the paintings, be too loud, or too messy, or perhaps they simply do not think this age group has much to learn from a museum. However, it is time for this stigma to end. Museums need to learn how to use their resources and unique learning environments to benefit the development of early childhood museum-goers. The museum will then benefit by cultivating life-long supporters.
Limitations to this Study

Although this research study has reached its goal of examining early childhood programs in museums for best practices, I am aware of its limitations and shortcomings. This study was limited by time and length. Time was a factor that affected the number of observations for each case study. Ideally, more than one observation at each site would be conducted, to determine how the various approaches work with different groups of students or as carried out by different educators. There were only three case studies, making generalizing for other populations a challenge. To address this, additional case studies with multiple observations should have been included. With additional time, investigating other programs would benefit this study as well. For instance, observing the Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center’s museum programming would have provided opportunities to view both classroom instruction as well as time spent learning in the museum. In addition, because of time, this study couldn’t address any of the long-term affects that early visits to museum can have on young visitors.
Future Areas of Research

This study has revealed the need for future research to be done in several areas. One area that stands out to me was the social and emotional component of learning in museums. Museums can provide an excellent platform to build relationships, express views, interpret the ideas of others, and connect with concepts and ideas. More research on how museum visits can help foster social and emotional development both in the early childhood years, but also as children and adolescents grow. Social and emotional development is generally focused on in younger students and forgotten about as children age and education focuses on academic subjects. This research has sparked my curiosity to explore how social and emotional development can be addressed in museums for both early childhood aged children and beyond.

In addition, further areas of study include examining inquiry-based methodology with this age group. While that was explored in this study in the program at the Guggenheim, examining this approach in multiple museums would be a very interesting study that would not only add to the field of early childhood education in museums, but would offer early childhood educators another methodology to draw from.
Addendum: An Early Childhood Education Program at El Museo del Barrio

Learning a great deal from the above case studies, I used my conclusions to create a pilot program for an early childhood audience at El Museo del Barrio. In the description below, I begin with an overview of El Museo del Barrio and its history with educational programming, to make the argument that the museum needs to adopt this program if it wants to uphold its mission and create its next generation of supporters. I then outline the logistics of the proposed program as well as its content. I concluded this program description by providing a list of the goals and objectives and inputs and outputs necessary to carry out this program successfully. This proposal will be submitted to El Museo del Barrio for approval of a pilot program in the future.

About El Museo del Barrio

El Museo del Barrio was founded in 1969 by artist and educator Raphael Montañez Ortiz and a coalition of parents, educators, artists, and activists who noted that mainstream museums largely ignored Latino artists (El Museo del Barrio About Us, n.d.). Since its inception, El Museo has been committed to celebrating and promoting Latino culture, thus becoming a cornerstone of El Barrio, and a valuable resource for New York City (El Museo del Barrio About Us, n.d.). The museum’s mission is to “present and preserve the art and culture of Puerto Ricans and all Latin Americans in the United States” (El Museo del barrio Mission Statement, n.d.). The museum strives to achieve this through its extensive collections, varied exhibitions and publications, bilingual public programs, educational activities, festivals, and special events, with the larger goal of creating the next generation of museum-goers.
The museum was first housed in a classroom at a local public school. Because of its founding, El Museo has a particular interest in education. It offers a variety of school and educator programs including guided tours and hands-on workshops that explore the museum’s collection and exhibitions, off-site school partnerships that pair a teaching artist with a classroom teacher to do an in-depth project using arts to explore curriculum topics, and educator open houses to share the resources of the museum with local teachers and administrators. The school programs, however, focus on grades K-12, leaving out the growing population of early childhood students. If the museum truly wants to develop the next generation of museum goers, why not begin with this age group?

The museums tours and hands-on workshops are already inquiry based and could easily be tailored to fit the developmental needs of early learners. Even the language used to describe the program mirrors the research on early childhood programming, for example, “El Museo offers a variety of Guided Tours designed to encourage observations, spark curiosities, and create conversations around selected works of art and objects…Visitors will engage in interactive discussions and activities facilitated by a museum educator to build upon their prior knowledge and experiences, make connections with what they see, and develop a deeper understanding of the works of art discussed” (El Museo del Barrio Guided Tours, n.d.). The acknowledgement of the value of building on prior knowledge while sparking curiosities demonstrates that these programs reflect the founding principles of early childhood programming and the above recommendations for best practices. This would make it easy for the museum to adapt its current programming to this audience.
Logistics

Currently, El Museo’s tours are inquiry-based and involved the visual exploration of 4-5 objects on display. Groups have the option to also participate in a hands-on art-making activity following the tour. Programs are therefore either 60 minutes or 120 minutes. Based on the length of the programs in the above case studies, a preschool program at El Museo del Barrio should be 90 minutes in length. This would allow for both a gallery exploration as well as a hands-on art making time without the students getting restless. Students will spend roughly 45 minutes in the gallery looking at 4-5 works of art (each stop would include multiple activities designed to keep students engaged and moving) and another 45 minutes participating in a hands-on art making activity. The Guggenheim Museum has a very large space which takes time to walk through as a group. For this reason, an hour-long tour was a perfect amount of time. However, given the small size of the gallery spaces at El Museo, an hour may be too long to keep the students’ attention. On the other end of the spectrum, the time spent in the gallery during the Rubin Museum’s program was too short and needed more structure. Allowing for ample time both in the galleries and creating artwork will help create a fun and meaningful experience for these young visitors. Having opportunities to look at, interpret, discuss, and reflect on art objects will build social and emotional development, foster critical thinking skills, and build literacy as discussed above. In addition, children will gain confidence in themselves as artists as a result of exploring various art materials and sharing their works with the rest of the group.

The three case studies demonstrated that the ideal number of participants per group would be between 8 and 10 students. The small ratios of students to educator is
essential, and allows for maximum attention to be paid to the students while also allowing for meaningful group discussions and learning to occur. It also insures that the educator is able to manage the group and keep everyone engaged and safe (including the artwork). Most classes are larger than 8-10 students, so dividing the group among several educators will often be necessary.

**Content**

The content of these tours will only differ slightly from the tours for older students. They will rely heavily on the inquiry-based method, adjusting the language of the questions to accommodate growing vocabularies, and rely heavily on relating the artworks to the students’ lives. The average early childhood tour would examine 3-4 artworks in the galleries after a brief introduction to the museum and what it means to be “The Museum of the Neighborhood.” The concept of a neighborhood is explored in early childhood education and is a good starting point for relating to something familiar to children, especially if there is no pre-visit to the class as was the case in the First Impressions program at the Guggenheim Museum.

In addition to asking questions, students will also participate in a variety of gallery activities during this time to provide the hands-on experiences that are so vital in early childhood learning. Some of these gallery activities will include movement, sketching, small-group activities, and the like. These activities should be fun and meaningful and approach the many ways in which children learn as discussed above. These activities should also be open-ended, allowing for multiple interpretations, while
also setting parameters for safe museum activities, as the museum educator at the Guggenheim demonstrated with the running through paper experiment.

The environment will be altered to be age-appropriate while also building trust and allowing for exploration of materials and ideas. Within the galleries, this will be done by allowing children to sit and draw or sketch on the floor, work in small groups, or sit in a circle to share their thoughts, mirroring the practices of early childhood classrooms. During the art-making activity, which will take place in El Taller (El Museo’s workshop space located on the third floor of the museum), students will participate in an art-making activity that is open-ended and incorporates the exploration of several types of materials. The tables and chairs in El Taller will have to be shortened, and smaller chairs will need to be purchased (or pillows as seen in the Rubin Museum Case Study). Materials can then be made easily accessible to the children. Unlike the above programs, while open-ended, this activity will have several instructions, and the museum educator will model different techniques for the children to experiment with. During the project, the museum educator will circulate around the room, engaging with students, acting as an advisor, much the way the art teacher does in the Reggio Emilia approach. Five to ten minutes will be left at the end of each session for the children to share their creations and reflect on their art-making process. They will have an opportunity to admire each other’s work and offer positive feedback to their classmates. This will not only help them build their descriptive language skills, but also to connect to one another and foster their social and emotional development.

One of the unique aspects that El Museo del Barrio possesses is the ability to provide bilingual programming to the Spanish-speaking population in East Harlem.
There are a growing number of bilingual early childhood education programs in the surrounding area that could benefit tremendously from programming geared towards their students. At an age where language development and social and emotional development are happening simultaneously, it is important to help students learn ways to express themselves, whether it is through their native language, a new language, or through art-making. El Museo provides a tremendous resource to these students and their families, offering a place to explore their developing identities. Using this resource for those children in the neighborhood at such a young age could help keep them connected to the museum and provide the next generation of El Museo supporters right here in the neighborhood where it was founded.

**Goals and Objectives of the Program**

The main goals for this program include:

- Fostering a social and emotional development using art and objects as a platform for discussion, allowing students to connect with one another and learn from each other.
- Sparking curiosities through play, conversations, and exploration of art materials.
- Providing students with a fun and meaningful early learning experience in the museum, with the intention of creating life-long museum advocates.
- Using the resources of the museum to assist early childhood students’ learning both in and out of the classroom and providing an open dialogue
between museum educators and early childhood teachers to exchange best practices.

Throughout this program students will:

• Engage in lively discussions about works of art in an developmentally appropriate way, building language skills, social and emotional development, and critical thinking and problem solving skills.

• Participate in gallery activities and hands-on art making activities that spark new ideas and allow for self-expression.

• Connect ideas expressed in the gallery to their existing body of knowledge by relating works of art to their own experiences and interpretations.

• Have opportunities to create art and express themselves, experimenting with a variety of materials and ideas.

Inputs and Outputs:

In order to make the above program a success, the museum will need to provide the following:

• Trained museum educators or teaching artists to lead the programs.

• Trained museum staff to develop content and developmentally appropriate practices in the galleries and evaluate the program.

• A staff member to reach out to the growing early childhood education programs throughout East Harlem and New York City and sign them up for programming.
• Staff members to assist in making spaces developmentally appropriate (lowering tables, etc.)

• Age-appropriate materials to use both in the galleries and in the hands-on workshops.

As a result of these programs the museum will:

• Gain a new audience of students and teachers to exchange ideas with.

• Provide resources to the growing number of early childhood education programs in New York City.

• Provide an opportunity for the exchange of ideas amongst different education professions.

• Provide an example for other museums of how to adopt programming to meet the needs of early childhood learners.
Reference List


Images

Figure 1: The Education Center at the Rubin Museum of Art

Figure 2: The Ball Pit Area at the Children’s Museum of Art