

## **Final Developmental Profile**

Developmental Framework for Planning Cultural Exhibits for Children  
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Children are active learners. They absorb a tremendous amount of information about the world and themselves at all times and in many ways. Children do not, however, learn in isolation. They live in a social world that is organized to teach them a particular way of seeing and understanding the world. This social organization is what we refer to as culture. It is the organization that prepares children to take their place in society. As we become an increasingly culturally diverse society within a world that is becoming smaller with each technological advance in communication and expansion of the global economy, how children learn about their own culture and the culture of others becomes an increasingly important part of their education, and the responsibility of parents and other educators.

The purpose of this profile is to provide guidance to planners of museum exhibits as to how children learn about culture from a developmental perspective. Core to the developmental perspective is the assumption that children at different ages learn about the world in different ways. This profile will summarize some important developmental assumptions and then describe an age relevant pattern for learning about culture that can be used as guide to planners to evaluate the effectiveness of exhibits designed to improve a child's understanding and to instill an appreciation of another culture.

### **Developmental Assumptions**

Although there are multiple theories of human development that can be used to explain children's understanding of culture (see Appendix A), there are certain core assumptions that are shared across most of these theories. Based foremost on the pioneering work of Jean Piaget and adapted by later scholars interested in the developmental sequences through which social understanding emerges, cognitive-developmental stage theories are used to create a framework that illustrates the manner in which culture is perceived and understood by children and how understanding and appreciation can be promoted through museum exhibits.

*Sequenced:* A core developmental assumption is that learning occurs in sequences that build on each other. In other words, what we learn and understand today is influenced by what we learned and understood yesterday. New learning is understood through the lens created by previous learning. Therefore, the experiences that children bring to a cultural exhibit will greatly influence what they take from the exhibit.

*Cognitive Capability:* Piaget showed us that a person's level of cognitive development influences how he or she learns as well as what types of information he or she is capable of understanding at a given age. This capability starts at the level of sensory-motor and becomes increasingly concrete and then abstract as the child develops into adolescence. This developing capability is influenced by both biological and environmental factors. Not only does neurological maturation reveal predictable patterns of growth in development, developments in cultural understanding reflect the support a child receives in the environment: direct guidance, emotional support, and the physical properties in the environment all facilitate greater cultural understanding (Fischer & Lamborn, 1988). Piaget's (1994) early work on stages of cognitive growth in social understanding and Selman's (1980) model of perspective-taking abilities reveal that children move from a tactile, physical understanding of the world, toward the organization of these sensory experiences into concrete examples or activities, which later become interrelated to create the adolescent's complex, abstract and verbally constructed understanding of such things as the meaning of culture. Most likely, the goal of an exhibit for children and pre-adolescents should be to help children take both their own prior sensory and concrete understandings and new ones presented through the exhibit, and guide their organization of these experiences and concrete cultural symbols into more flexible, abstract, and personal understanding of another culture..

*Role of Context:* The child develops through interaction with his or her world. The more enriched that interaction, the more a child learns and, some believe, the more rapidly he or she will learn. In addition, contextual experience triggers the learning of content as well as movement through developmental sequences. There are several ways that adults can help to scaffold children's understanding of culture. One primary way is to help children reflect on the meaning or their experience of an event or property of their own culture and then encourage children to link that to what they imagine are similar experiences or properties of other cultures (Fischer & Kennedy, 1997; Karcher, 1997). Adults scaffold or support understanding by providing high support for learning either through modeling, providing examples, or by drawing children's attention to two separate phenomena and helping them discover the relationship between the phenomena. More than simply by providing information, adults facilitate learning by helping children find commonalities and relationships among seemingly disparate activities, artifacts, or beliefs. Through the exhibits, adults should be helped to serve as catalysts for children's own efforts to make connections across cultures.

*Children are Innately Prejudiced.* One challenge to children's ability to link their own cultural experiences to those of another group, and which undermines adult's ability to facilitate understanding, is children's tendency to stereotype and hold negative evaluations about cultural differences. Although most adults would prefer to believe otherwise, it is quite clear that young children are universally prejudiced. Just like children between two and three years of age are more aggressive than individuals at any other age, five and six year olds are more prejudiced, at least overtly, than most adults. Children's direct expression of stereotypes and prejudicial feelings is enough to make almost any adult blush and feel uncomfortable.

There are many reasons or explanations for children's stereotyping and prejudice. For example, children are afraid of the dark, and generalize this fear onto people with dark skin or clothing (Katz, 1987; Hirschfield, 1996). Children also seem to accept society's stereotypes and prejudices wholeheartedly and only begin to entertain beliefs about groups (even their own) that run counter to prejudicial beliefs when they approach adolescence (Bigler & Liben, 1993; Doyle & Aboud, 1995). Part of this problem is that children can only differentiate (or make distinct) observable, concrete characteristics of group membership. Not only do they not consider psychological variation within individuals, they do not perceive attitudinal or behavioral variation within groups, such that if one member acts in accordance with a stereotype, that further confirms that all members act that way (Katz, 1987; Linville, Salovey, & Fischer, 1986). Nor can children understand the psychological motivations or explanations for individual behaviors or beliefs, let alone the psychological motivations or values held by different groups (Quintana, 1998). There is little variation because children and youth can only coordinate so many ideas about ethnic or racial groups simultaneously (Karcher, 2001), and children are likely to use global, physically observable traits and behaviors as indicators of the "goodness" or "badness" of individuals or groups whom they view as members of particular groups.

Here are some examples of how the absence of abstract thinking among children may inhibit adult's ability to foster intergroup understanding among the children they guide through the museum. Before age twelve, children are not likely to understand the following phenomena because these phenomena require either a social/psychological interpretation, a historical contextualization, or too many concepts to be mentally retained and coordinated simultaneously: (a) some ethnic minority groups tend to achieve less in school and professionally because of the history of discrimination, the persistence of social inequality in the experiences provided to different groups, and the Pygmalion phenomenon (people tend to perform to the level they believe others expect of them); (b) although some members of a group may indeed be mean-spirited, self-centered, or greedy (or whatever stereotype abounds), not all members are this way and so such characteristics should not be expected of members of that group; or (c) there are more similarities across groups (shared by all people) than between groups (or unique to particular groups). Explanations such as these for why some ethnic groups differ in terms of class, educational or professional attainment, or participation in different activities (e.g., sports), will fall on deaf ears. Therefore, exhibits should consider carefully the information that is intended to be learned by children. Concepts that require a "systemic" or historical explanation, like slavery, class differences between groups, or racism are not likely to be successful with children before age 12.

*Implications:* The implications of these assumptions for a children's museum's cultural exhibit are that an exhibit must be able to communicate information in such a way that it stimulates learning for children who are at different phases of development, engages children of varying cognitive abilities, and encourages children to apply lessons to themselves or their own culture and then to imagine, extrapolate, or even guess about similar experiences for members of other groups. When considering creating a variety of exhibits for a particular museum, this challenge is more easily met. Attempting to meet these diverse needs within the single exhibit is a more challenging task, requiring diligence, and the development of multiple strategies to meet the diverse developmental needs of the audience. Information that triggers learning and development in a 5 year old may be ignored by or turn off a 10 year old, whereas the appropriate trigger for the 10 year old may not stimulate the 5 year old. This likelihood is increased when adult guidance is not provided for helping the children make use of the information they are learning. Several strategies and implications can help to ensure success:

- The exhibit must be able to communicate information in such a way that it stimulates learning for children who are at different phases of development, engages children of varying cognitive abilities, and encourages children to apply lessons to themselves or their own cultures differently.
- Children's experiences need to be the starting point for exhibit activities. Exhibit activities should start with the familiar, with a relationship to the self, and then move to the family, community or world.
- There need to be multiple levels of entry, so that children can find relevance to their own lives and their own experiences.
- Exhibit components must be able to work independently, without being reliant upon a sequence, in order to be successful.
- Exhibits for children under 12 should be contextual, rather than station-based or as objects or components in isolation.
- Parents, facilitators or caregivers have a vital role to play in helping extend the exhibit experience and helping children connect it to their own experiences. A parent's user's guide that helps parents interpret their child's experiences, according to their developmental stage, would be a highly valuable tool.
- Children can better understand the uniqueness of a culture, if they are first introduced to the similarities between themselves and the other, before they are introduced to the differences.
- Exhibits need to be highly sensory and highly tactile, in order to reach the breadth of cognitive abilities that are represented in a children's museum exhibit audience.
- Concepts that require a systemic or historical explanation
- Because children are innately prejudiced, and believe that if one member of a group does something, it applies to all people of that group, multiple viewpoints should be shown to suggest that people within a group have individual beliefs and ideas.
- The goal for any children's museum cultural exhibit should be simply providing opportunities for a child's positive first exposure to a culture, rather than that the audience develop a greater cultural appreciation.

### **Learning culture, learning about a culture, appreciating a culture**

These are radically different phenomena. Most of what we learn about our own culture is done without thought or reflection. It is as vital to our being and breathing air and often just as invisible. We are subject to it and typically unaware of it—and our first awareness can feel noxious. Learning about another culture is like flying from a rural town to a big city. Once arrived, one is extremely conscious of every breath of air, of how the new combinations of city smells assault the senses. In fact, the very difference of air quality can lead to rejection of the place and the people by the person who is new to the environment. In the mid 1980's, one of the authors went to live in China for a year. His experience of the new smells he encountered in China and the people's unique ways of being was completely overwhelming at first. It took time to learn what the smells meant and how the interpersonal rules worked before he was able to start to appreciate the new culture. Yet those born and raised in China paid very little attention to the very same

rules and smells. This is likely what children experience when face-to-face with a foreign culture. Children seem to take their way as the only way. Since the goal of an exhibit is to set the stage for appreciation of a new culture, the exhibit needs to guide the participant through a series of developmentally appropriate learning experiences that can set the stage for understanding and then for appreciation.

### Defining Culture

This definition consumes academic careers and yet changes over time and across contexts. Without attempting to summarize whole fields of study, we will present a definition that is particularly relevant to museum exhibits for children who are likely to be thinking about observable traits, activities, and patterns of behaviors that distinguish cultural groups.

*Culture involves several major elements, such as:*

- ❖ *Culture includes the ideas a group of people has about themselves. Group-held philosophies and values are very hard to convey to young children, and should be described through observable descriptions of behaviors that illustrate the groups' efforts to meet universal needs, such as for safety, friendship, approval, and fun:*
  - Ideas about family: "Dad's more often make the family decisions"  
(Function: what kids do to win parental approval)
  - Ideas about gender: "Often girls are encouraged less than boys in schools."  
(Function: what teachers do to be approved of by society)
  - Ideas about class: "In their culture, people tend not to brag about their jobs or how much money they make."  
(Function: how one fits in, belongs)
  - Ideas about social relations: "In their culture, it is very important that younger people listen to what older people tell them."  
(Function: how children are taught to obey and how they earn approval of others)
  
- ❖ *Culture includes the ways a group of people agree to accomplish geographically determined tasks, such as:*
  - Food gathering and distribution, such as being picked in fields by hand vs. reaped in machines on farms and being moved via carts vs. trucks.
  - Shelter, such as living close together or far apart, with or without relatives.
  - Transportation: "They often get around by camel rather than a car."
  - Relationship with other cultures or groups, such as how groups define themselves and interaction with those from other groups.
  
- ❖ *Cultures are often known by the artifacts they produce, such as:*
  - Art: "Their art is often shown on plates and glassware, like ours is sometimes on t-shirts or on the sides of buildings."
  - Utensils: In one country, people reuse chopsticks but in another people use them and then dispose of plastic, both as ways cultures manage the need for utensils when in public.
  - Institutions: In one country bathhouses provide a place to promote health and find friendship, yet in another the gym and arcade are used.

Learning one's own culture involves acquiring its dominant ideas, becoming competent at the ways in which one's culture accomplishes particular tasks, and learning how to create and use that culture's artifacts. Learning culture means looking at oneself more closely--taking what is familiar and making it foreign. Learning about culture, therefore, involves coming to an understanding of the way in which one's own people think about themselves, how they accomplish geographically determined tasks, and how they

celebrate their lives together. The first step in this lesson is to differentiate the child's own culture by helping the child see the purpose and functions of their own cultural practices and artifacts. Being able to recognize the artifacts that reflect that culture and distinguish them from artifacts produced by other cultures (e.g., a classic Chinese rug with its geometric design as opposed to a Persian rug with its floral design) is what Kegan (1982) calls moving from being "subject to" one's culture to taking one's culture and having it "as object"--one takes culture as object when they can look at it, from multiple sides, as if one is looking at a beautiful stone held in one's hand.

Learning to appreciate another culture involves developing positive feelings about or a personal relationship with another culture's core values, how they manage certain tasks, and the artifacts a culture produces. Until one can take an object--see and understand the function and meaning of their own cultural practices and beliefs, they cannot see other cultures as anything but odd, foreign, and unfortunately, somewhat threatening (Katz, 1987; McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978). Once a child has come to "see" all the things that make up their own culture--what they earlier experienced subjectively, without really recognizing its significance--the child can ask him or herself about the function of other culture's values, tasks, and artifacts. This can facilitate a sense of connectedness and similarity across cultures (Karcher, 1996; Quintana, 1998).

A core assumption of this developmental framework is that the goal of an exhibit is, at very least, set the stage for the visitor to understand another culture. At best, it would serve to create an appreciation which is more than knowing more about a culture, but rather involves having a sense of a personal and valued relationship with that culture. For that reason, we are using a model of development that combines cognitive, affective, and interpersonal factors.

### **Developmental Framework (Ages 5-12)**

Focusing on the children from ages 5-12, we suggest addressing 3 developmental phases. Labels and definitions of the phases are provided below with guidelines as to what types of activities would be developmentally appropriate. The model is based on the work of Robert Kegan, whose main principle about developmental growth is that what is first lived by but not known by the person must be pointed out before it can be integrated more complexly with what one already knows. Given this principle, cultural understanding can be viewed as the careful intercoordination of blocks to build a tower or bridge. Each piece of culture, particularly the too-familiar aspects of one's own culture, must be "differentiated" or attended to before they can be integrated with what one learns about other cultures. Therefore, three phases of learning are suggested: (a) "Drawing out," (b) "Sizing up," and (c) "Reflecting on."

**Phase I:** "Drawing out": Differentiate concrete and physically experienced activities (ages 5 to 8)

First we must draw the child's attention to aspects of culture--move experiences from subjective to objective. For young children, this means experiencing things physically through action. Not being aware of their own culturalness, children will see other cultures as foreign, odd, and alien. This is the phase during which children will point at people who do not look like or act like them or their parents. Some children will want to understand what that difference is and why it is. They are not as interested in what it means about them or the other person, but simply want an explanation for the difference. With guidance they may become more interested in seeing how it works for the other group or other person, which could allow the child to then question how it relates to his or her world. This is a phase that is marked by the emerging ability to observe the world and to make literal, concrete connections. It is not a period of self-reflection and the search for understanding. A child in this phase is eager for experience and will attend to a stimulus as long as it feels new and informative. Things that are unusually shaped, colored, or used will be attractive to them. Varying by cognitive ability, biology, and family training, some children in this phase can have a low frustration tolerance and may want to move on to the next experience as soon as the current one has lost its stimulus value. Such a child can look completely engaged at one moment and then equally disengaged at the next. Think of a 1<sup>st</sup> grade birthday party where the greatest part of the moment is opening a present, and then the next, and the next without pausing to really understand what each gift is about -- until later. Children in this phase do not learn from repeating a particular act over and over, but through participating in several similar activities that share common elements. For example, they learn

more about problem solving and sportspersonship by playing Parcheesi, Monopoly, and Checkers, than if they just play checkers repeatedly.

*Implications for exhibits:*

- Focus on artifacts that are engaging, possibly both visual and tactile. Having exhibits to which they can physically relate (in terms of size and artifacts) is very important to this phase.
- A well-informed parent or caregiver can help redirect a child's natural impulse toward negative stereotypes if given the proper interpretive tools. Messages to parents, either through an interpretive guide or text can help accomplish this goal.
- Information needs to be delivered in short chunks that are easily digested, and which provide the opportunity for the child to say, "Oh, they use that for X; for us, we use (own cultural artifact) for X." An exhibit planner might provide culturally analogous artifacts from "American" culture as examples of such a relationship.
- Disturbing issues or content, such as the complexities and horrors of slavery, ethnic conquest, or dramatic cultural practices should be avoided at this developmental phase. These likely would exacerbate fears and perceptions of difference that are alienating and disconnecting. Instead, exhibit content could focus on routine, familiar cultural practices that point out a cultural group's perseverance, strength, or positive attributes that helped them through difficulties, and lead to a child's sense of connection.
- Open-ended experiences that allow a child to feel success, no matter what the outcome, should be highlighted, rather than experiences that allow for only one correct answer.
- Exhibits for this age group should have enough varied activities for the child to move from experience to experience, rather than relying on them to repeat the same experience.

**Phase 2:** "Sizing up": Helping the child order her world and mentally link together and coordinate disparate aspects of a culture, both her own and another's (ages 7 to 9)

Building on their observations and experiences during the "Drawing out" phase of cultural development, what Kegan calls the Imperial child has developed a very concrete sense of how the world works and is very interested in seeing how he or she can begin to manipulate the world to increase his or her sense of personal competence and independence. These children are focused on meeting their needs, more than the needs of others. They want to make sense, bring order, and size things up. A child in this phase has learned how individual things in the world work; now they want to understand how the world works for them as a whole made up of concrete events and artifacts. They want to understand how new information will help them to improve their skills in gaining mastery over their environment. Strategies that others use for resolving challenges that are different from the child's own are interesting to the extent that can help them find more effective ways to resolve the same or similar challenges. Given this, life-size puzzles or mazes that require knowledge about another's culture to master could be engaging and appealing to such children. Difference, therefore, can become a challenge in and of itself, since it can challenge the child's sense of competence. They begin to place differential value on differences they observe, and are increasingly drawn to commonalities both for security reasons and the ego gratification that people and things that are like them in some way can provide.

*Implications for exhibits:*

- Include artifacts that can be manipulated to show how they work: Cause and effect illustrations, even involving people and social practices are useful.
- Include opportunities for children to solve puzzles that allow physical movement or involvement.
- Connections from one topic to another need to be as seamless as possible, and preferably should be linked to something similar in "American" culture. Highlighting the similarities between cultures is often more useful than pointing out the differences.

- Include things that visitors can take away from the exhibit (something they could make themselves and take with them) that could serve as concrete reminders of the similarities between the audience and the group that is the focus of the exhibit. (e.g., how both groups cook, or how both groups solve math problems, or how both groups play a game.)
- Create experiences within the exhibit for children to begin understanding how this new knowledge or experience with another culture is relevant and useful to them. (e.g., ways in which understanding this other culture will help them solve an interpersonal problem, or what this culture has provided for the world.)
- Include information about what roles people like themselves (e.g., similar age, gender, and interests) play in a culture could also reveal similarities, even if the link between them is only the function (to do or cause X) or outcomes (to be liked or win parent's approval)

**Phase 3:** “Reflecting on”: Facilitating interpersonal understanding (ages 8 to 12)

Although we would like children to leave the cultural exhibits better understanding racism, more committed to fight discrimination, and truly valuing other cultures, this is not likely to happen. Unable even to understand that cultural groups are, in fact, held together by collective beliefs, histories, values and practices, the most a child may take from this exhibit is an understanding that (a) cultures are functional: each has practices that serve a purpose that the child can identify with or understand based on her own experience; and (b) each person will think about the world differently because of the way they differently achieve goals and engage in different activities but with the same, common, universal functions. The ultimate goal, then, of the exhibits would be for children to leave with (a) an interest in other groups, (b) a desire to figure out how other cultures use their practices to meet their own needs, and (c) a willingness to be open to those practices out of a belief that they serve some purpose. Ideally, this phase would be characterized by the child's desire for mutuality and reciprocity--of bi-directional understanding across members of different cultural groups. The first step toward this goal is to help children develop a true interest in other groups. Luckily, children and especially preadolescents are interested in how they, as unique individuals, can fit with other individuals and into the group. They want to know that they can connect with the emotional experience of others. They want to know how to have a relationship with others that will be mutually satisfying. They will, therefore, steer away from relationships that they fear they might fail or might fail them. As they become less judgmental about others, they also become more discriminating about with whom they want to spend their time. By exploring the roles they may take within their culture and extrapolating the same roles or goals to other cultures, between-group similarities may emerge that serve to promote the preadolescents' identity development and character.

*Implications for exhibits:*

- Include opportunities that show how one can become involved in the other culture (through work, travel, clubs, volunteering), as a means of extending the exhibit experience.
- Include experiences that show the emotional experiences of people, especially those their own age. What kind of issues do they deal with during their daily lives?
- Provide opportunities for children in this age group to respond, or speak back about the issues they have dealt with in the exhibit.
- Illustrate within group differences, such as the variety of roles that are possible within the culture are good ways to preclude stereotyping.
- Include experiences that show how members of a culture make the transition into adulthood.
- Include experiences that demonstrate the variety of roles that are possible within the culture.
- Include experiences that reveal the obstacles to youth's development within the culture that are interesting or unique (but provide some cultural function) as this may serve to stimulate empathy---“I have that same problem too!”
- Include experiences that provide visitors the chance to dig deeper and learn more about an aspect of the culture that they find particularly interesting. Multi-media or computer-based

approaches are a good way to do this, as they are age appropriate, and can serve to provide lots of additional information in very small amount of space.

### **Summary of Implications: How can an exhibit do it all?**

We have highlighted that each child will approach an exhibit in a unique way. The youngest child will seek sensory experiences, and these experiences should be engaging but reflect a function the child can relate to. The older child, interested in relationships and mastery over her environment, will want to know how things (and people's relationships) work—what leads to what and why. The preadolescent, increasingly aware of her own internal life of feelings, distinct beliefs, and attitudes, will be able to identify with youth in other cultures and see how aspects of a culturally different youth are similar to their own. Therefore, when developing exhibits, the exhibits should provide tactile, sensory opportunities to get involved with the exhibit—either through feeling, hearing, or seeing attractive artifacts, but better through activities that engage them and result in a concrete representation of what they are learning. The exhibit will also need to make clear the parallels of an artifact or practice to the daily lives of Americans, and should help children and their parents easily understand the function of things and behaviors, such as through parallel examples in U.S. popular culture. These parallels, finally, should be ones that have a developmentally specific appeal to the preadolescent who will wonder about the internal lives of culturally different youth.

To help children take their own subjective culture “as object” each exhibit will need to achieve three goals simultaneously. The content will need to be experiences in a way that *draws out* the child's own culture and engages them in the activity of attending as much to her own culture as to another's. Second, the exhibit should help the child *size up* both her own and another culture, and this occurs when a child is helped to take all of the concrete pieces of the exhibits and, through adult guidance, organize these into a coherent set of practices and related activities that reflect universal functions. Finally, these functions, practices and activities would ideally reflect the kinds of functions and experiences that are most significant to pre-adolescents: making friends, getting along with parents, taking on more “mature” roles at home and society, managing romantic feelings and situations, and making the kinds of decisions that serve as the basis for the pre-adolescent's budding identity—an enduring sense of self. An exhibit that facilitates all of these experiences should be able to provide information about culture that also facilitates an empathetic, sympathetic, and sincere valuing of the culture being presented.

### **Conclusion:**

One of the messages that we want people to take from this developmental profile is that there are ways to help children learn about other cultures that are relatively straightforward, but to get them to appreciate other cultures in an active and mature manner is a difficult and complex task. For children ages 5 to 12, the developmentally appropriate goal is to make them aware of their own and other's cultures by introducing them to the differences in a non-threatening manner. If the long term goal is to help American children who are from a predominately European background learn to appreciate Asian cultures and people from Asia, then a positive outcome from these exhibits is to help children see Asian culture as familiar, interesting and accessible. The more the differences and inaccessibility of Asian culture is emphasized, the more likely it will be that a child will develop a negative impression that will form the template for future interactions as an adolescent and adult.

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