The emotional impact of museum visits

1 Introduction

The Making a Mark (MaM) programme ran a small-scale evaluation on how students feel as a result of their MaM visits. All seven partner museums running MaM programmes took part in the study. 310 students from nine schools gave their feedback. Students were from Key Stages 1 and 2. All were taking part in three visits and most had completed all three when filling in the form.

Students were given a sheet that simply asked them to complete the sentence: “My visit to the museum made me feel … because ……………………” A range of emotional words were printed around the edge of the sheet; some positive, some negative. Although we were conscious this would be likely to influence the words chosen we considered that this device would prompt deeper thought about responding. We hoped that children would consider all the words and produce a more nuanced response and that in doing so, they would be able to give more thought to why the museum visit impacted on them as it did.

Words provided were:
- Happy • Sad • Bored • Fascinated • Excited • Scared • Amazed
- Fantastic • Proud • Special • Marvellous • Buzzing • Fed up • Silly
- Strong • Tired • Interested • Surprised • Curious

The students completed their sheets after a visit, back in the classroom and teachers sent the forms to the Museum. It was therefore not possible to standardise how much discussion took place around the form filling. However, the range of responses, the inclusion of some negative feedback (albeit tiny), the inclusion of words not provided on the sheet, the imperfect spelling and grammar and the genuine sound of children’s voices coming through the written responses indicate that the responses are genuinely what students wanted to say.
2 How do students feel about their museum visits?

Words selected from those provided on the sheet:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>No of students</th>
<th>% of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excited</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amazed</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fascinated</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proud</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curious</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantastic</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surprised</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marvellous</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buzzing</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tired</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bored</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silly</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fed up</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Less than 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scared</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Words used by students, not provided on sheet:

| Extraordinary | 5 |
| Good          | 4 |
| Fun           | 2 |
| Confident     | 2 |

There were also a range of words and expressions that individual students used. These included: groovy, nervous, in the olden days, creative, educational, awesome, puzzled and full of more knowledge.

As the numbers from the main table show, many children chose to use a number of words to describe their feelings. Some chose similar words to emphasise the depth of feeling e.g.:

“My visit to the museum made me feel surprised and amazed because I loved learning about the wood.”

or

“My visit to the museum made me feel interested and fascinated because I enjoyed the painting and the topic of Christopher Dresser.”
Some chose different words to capture the range of emotions they felt, e.g.:
“My visit to the museum made me feel curious, excited, proud and special because I have learned lots of history about Middlesbrough and Japan.”
or
“My visit to the museum made me feel proud and happy and fascinated because I learned a lot of things. It was very interesting.”

The vast majority of students expressed positive feelings about their visit. Only 10 students, just 3%, who chose negative words made entirely negative comments. Some choosing bored or tired qualified this e.g.:
“My visit to the museum made me feel tired because I did so much in the cool museum.”
or
“My visit to the museum made me feel bored but interested because I was tired but interested with the jewellery.”

The two top emotions appear to be happiness and excitement. However these are closely related. Looking more deeply at the figures it would appear that there are two “clusters” of emotion that are high scoring: happiness/excitement and interest.

Happiness was the most common response (37%), however this is an even stronger finding when you combine the incidence of related words such as excited and buzzing. 60% (185 children) used at least one of these words and these three words make up 42% of the words children chose from the given list.

“My visit to the museum made me feel happy and excited because I was really interested and I love painting.”

“My visit to the museum made me feel very, very buzzing and amazed because of the new things I learned.”
22% (113 children) chose at least one out of interested, fascinated or curious. These three words make up 27% of the words children chose from the given list.

“My visit to the museum made me feel fascinated because I saw so many extraordinary things like paintings.”

Unsurprisingly, the younger students tended to use fewer words to nuance their feelings than older students. They also tended to choose happy.

“My visit to the museum made me feel excited because it was super cool and marvellous”.

However many younger students also made very insightful comments too:

“My visit to the museum made me feel interested because it made me think.”

3 What makes them feel that way?

Students were asked to explain why they felt as they did. As this was an open question, the responses were openly coded, that is the “chunks” in which to organise them came from the students’ words.

Things that engendered a positive response:

**Being active in their learning:**

36% (112 children) mentioned the activities as at least part of the reason for their positive emotion. The activities they mentioned vary according to which session they have taken part in. However dressing up, painting, drawing and playing games are all frequently mentioned as popular activities.

“My visit to the museum made me feel interested because it had lots of activities and they were great.”
Learning something new:
31% (97 children) either mentioned that learning new things or learning something specific was a reason for their positive feelings about the museum visit.

“My visit to the museum made me feel marvellous because I learned so many new things.”

Seeing interesting things:
18% (56 children) mentioned that one reason for their positive feelings was looking at the original objects or artworks.

“My visit to the museum made me feel interested, surprised, happy, fantastic, special because we learned new things about our history and the art was outstanding.”

Because it was an enjoyable experience:
13% (40 children) attributed their positive feelings to a general sense of fun, amazement or enjoyment on their visits.

“My visit to the museum made me feel happy and fun because I have had a great day.”

Because it was a novel learning environment:
8% (24 children) commented on how the museum or the session being a novel learning environment excited or interested them.

“My visit to the museum made me feel fascinated because I have never been here.”

Connecting to existing interests:
7% (21 children) noted that their pre-existing interest in something relevant to the visit was at the heart of their enjoyment.
“My visit to the museum made me feel amazed and interested because I love art and I wanted to learn more about art.”

**I succeeded:**

4% (11 children) mentioned that they achieved something new or succeeded in some way at the museum and that this was the root of their feeling.

“Thank you for inviting us to the Dorman Museum. I really enjoyed going there. You inspired me to do more things like what activities we did there. You make me do things I was never capable of so thank you. Please invite us again because I think you inspired the whole class, so well done to you.”

In addition a small number of children had very specific personal reasons for what made the visits special for them. These included: identifying with costumed characters or session leaders, making connections to their own family and one student who said it made them proud to live in Middlesbrough.

Things that engendered a negative response:

This was a very small number of students, so the responses are often the opinion of one individual child. Nonetheless since MaM would want to be aware of anything that might result in negative feelings, the responses are listed below:

- too much writing
- too much sitting still
- messing about
- nervous of a new environment
- silly when dressed up
- sad connections with their family
- missing their mum

“My visit to the museum made me feel bored and silly because I am not good at sitting and listening.”
4 What impact does that have on them?

We didn’t ask students about the impact on them, but some students mentioned outcomes around progression. These included:

- being inspired
- wanting to learn more
- wanting to visit the museum again
- recommending the museum to others
- wanting to replicate activities
- continuing work back at home or school
- using sketchbooks from the museum

“Thank you for a lovely three trips to the Dorman Museum. I will definitely come back with other friends and family another time. I enjoyed learning about Japan! And many thanks for our sketch pads and other art creations. My favourite art creation was the wind sock from Japan. I loved my design and winning the prize of Borough bingo on our first trip. It could have been and the best three trips I had been on! Hope to see you again! With unforgettable memories...”

5 Conclusions

Museum visits are emotional experiences for students: it’s not just about intellectual learning. Feedback from the children confirms teacher feedback on the importance of active learning. Children also talk about how important and positive it is for them to feel they are learning something new. As well as the obvious “interested” to learn new things, children chose words like marvellous, amazing, excited, buzzing and even happy. Happy to be learning.

For some children museums are a novel environment that piques their curiosity, for others they are places that give them access to the kind of thing they already love. These children certainly express emotions that reflect their sense that MaM museums are places for them, exciting places full of hope, new learning experiences, fascinating stories and fun.
“My visit to the museum made me feel interested and curious because it made me think how hard it is for archaeologists.”

“My visit to the museum made me feel happy and excited because it was fun and adventurous. I love learning about the past.”

“My visit to the museum made me feel interested and amazed because I would like to be an artist.”

“My visit to the museum made me feel jealous because I wanted to work there so I can learn even more facts because I love history.”

“My visit to the museum made me feel proud, interested, amazed and fantastic because it was so fun to be there and I will definitely come again one day with others.”

“I had a wonderful time. I expected it to be good but it was amazing. I did learn a lot of interesting things about Christopher Dresser, Japan and Middlesbrough. I was amazed how you set this all up. I am truly inspired by you.”