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# **GO EAST! ASIAN EXHIBIT INITIATIVE**

## **OVERVIEW OF DEVELOPMENTAL FRAMEWORKS**

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### FRAMEWORK CONTEXT

The *Go East!* Asian Exhibit Initiative (*Go East!*), funded by the Freeman Foundation and administered by the Association of Children's Museums, will bring interactive exhibits on Asian culture to children and their families in more than 75 children's museums across the United States.

The Initiative provides an extraordinary set of opportunities and exciting "firsts" for individual museums and the entire children's museum field. In fact, by its very scope, the Initiative has changed the field's understanding of interactive cultural exhibits for children.

Nine children's museums are developing seven exhibits and supporting programs on China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam and Hmong culture. Between July 2005 and April 2008 seventy children's museums will host the exhibits, sometimes presenting their very first traveling exhibit. Exhibits will reflect the active participation of schools, museums and community organizations in the US and abroad which have contributed artifacts, research and children's work. More than two million children, families and teachers will visit the exhibits in large and small museums.

The Freeman Foundation's mission is to strengthen understanding and appreciation between Asia and the United States. In the same spirit, many museums in the US and around the world present cultural perspectives and connections to their visitors through artifacts and interpretation. Children's museums, recognizing that understanding cultures, one's own and others', is a part of every child's identity and shapes the present and future, have developed cultural exhibits and programs for their young audiences as well. Planning cultural exhibits for children, however, presents a significant challenge. Cultural concepts and content lay well outside the zone of familiarity, awareness and appreciation of most children five-to-twelve years old. Finding the fit between complex, abstract,

often-subtle cultural understandings and young, relatively inexperienced and concrete learners – children – demands more than cultural expertise and sensitivity and access to artifacts.

If children’s museums have a body of shared knowledge that they interpret to their audience, it is, perhaps, children’s development presented through developmentally appropriate exhibit and program experiences, which are often supplemented by handouts and other texts. *Developmentally appropriate* is an approach based on knowledge about how children develop and learn, addressing not only what should be learned but also how it is best learned and when. For children’s museums a developmental approach to exhibit and program planning is a primary way to understand and focus on its audience. With challenging content such as culture, a developmental approach assists museum planners in finding ways to help the child connect with cultural content in relevant, meaningful ways.

This initial review of the developmental frameworks is a first step in exploring their potential value. It examines the results of the Initiative’s effort to assure that the exhibits serve their young audiences and it also considers them as tools for exhibit and program planning for broad use across the field. It is based on examination of the six frameworks that were developed by the nine museums. Telephone interviews were also conducted with a member of each team who was involved with development of the frameworks. (Interviewees are noted below.)

- Austin Children’s Museum (Becky Jones, Director of Exhibits) with Madison Children’s Museum (Brenda Baker, Director of Exhibits)
- The Children’s Museum, Boston with Capital Children’s Museum (now National Children’s Museum) (Veronica Szalus, Director of Exhibits)
- Brooklyn Children’s Museum (Liza Reich Rawson, Senior Exhibit Developer)
- Children’s Museum of Houston (Cheryl McCallum, Director of Exhibits)
- Children’s Museum of Manhattan (Jane Bloom, Project Director)
- Minnesota Children’s Museum with The Children’s Museum, Seattle (Charlotte Beall, Exhibit/Education Consultant)

#### DEVELOPMENTAL FRAMEWORKS

To respond to the challenge of presenting rich but complex cultural information to children, the *Go East!* Initiative requested that each project create a *developmental framework*. A tool for exhibit and program planning, the framework would help shape experiences that engage with children’s grasp of culture appropriate for their age or stage of development.

A developmental framework for the Initiative was intended to look at information about children five-to-twelve years old through the lens of understanding culture, one’s own and others’. It would help answer the general question: “Based on what

we know about these children – their age, development, experiential backgrounds – how will they experience and understand the exhibit message and activity?” More like a snapshot of how children are likely to experience cultural information, a framework is not a standard nor does it establish expectations of what should happen at a given age.

Developmental frameworks are common reference tools. They are in baby books and parenting guides. They cover children’s physical (or sensori-motor), social-emotional and cognitive-linguistic development and describe what children typically do at predictable stages (or age ranges). When a doctor asks whether a toddler is putting two and three words together, she is basing that on what toddlers typically do at that developmental stage. Pulling herself up on chairs? Walking while holding onto things? Walking while carrying things in both hands? These are all developmental milestones in learning to walk.

While developmental frameworks are common reference tools in pediatricians’ offices, childcare settings and early childhood education training courses, they are generally not well known or used in other settings. The plentiful developmental milestones for infants and toddlers typically give way to curriculum standards or benchmarks for school-age children. When used in museums, developmental frameworks are more likely to be used as program rather than as exhibit planning tools. Even then frameworks generally describe domains of children’s development. They seldom related development to specific content.

In addition to serving as a tool for developing or adjusting exhibit or program content to ages or stages, the framework was also intended to be:

- a resource for hosting venues to understand the age group and cultural content of the exhibits they were hosting, since many venues might be presenting their first cultural exhibit;
- a tool for developing or adapting programs at host venues; and
- an example for advancing “developmental appropriateness” broadly across the field.

Because samples of content-specific developmental approaches are scarce, at best, no particular format, approach or components of a framework were specified for project teams. Instead, broad parameters were intended to invite museums to customize a tool that served their project, audience and institution. The framework needed to:

- outline children’s development (age, abilities, experiences and other relevant attributes);
- relate children’s understanding of culture in informal learning settings;

- use primary and/or secondary research, observation, questioning or prototyping as appropriate.

### DEVELOPING A FRAMEWORK

Four suggestions were made for getting started.

- Adapt an existing developmental framework to address the cultural focus and the age group and accommodate diverse social and experiential considerations.
- Create an original framework using characteristics salient to the cultural focus and informal learning settings using original research generated through the project.
- Work with another museum to create a shared framework.
- Develop a framework that meets the above purpose in another way.

All of the suggested approaches were used to some degree and in various combinations. The work of Arnold Gesell and the Gesell Institute for Human Development were used as a framework along with the developmentally appropriate approach described by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), selecting for cultural factors. Children were grouped by ages (3-5, 5-7, etc.), by grades and by experiential factors such as readers and non-readers.

Frameworks were developed by project team members and by consultants in various combinations. Together Madison Children's Museum (MCM) and Austin Children's Museum (ACM) contracted with professors at the University of Wisconsin (Madison). Selinda Research Associates (Chicago, IL) prepared a review of the literature for Brooklyn Children's Museum (BCM) and Minnesota Children's Museum and The Children's Museum, Seattle, (MCM/TCM) which was also shared with Children's Museum of Manhattan (CMOM).

Development of frameworks by project members followed similar paths and serve as examples for how other museums might develop frameworks. During the exhibit development phase, members of project teams read, researched and dug into educational philosophy and sifted through existing profiles for cultural information. They synthesized vast amounts of information from social development, Visual Learning Theory, ethnic and cultural literacy, Anti-Bias Curriculum, moral development, etc.

Preliminary frameworks typically were organized along dimensions that had emerged as significant. For the audience, material was separated into age ranges, grades or developmental phases. Content was organized into key concepts, curriculum standards or exhibit messages. Frameworks were drafted, reviewed and

polished, going back-and-forth between team members and evolving into a variety of formats.

Work on the framework sometimes surfaced new questions. Asking and answering questions such as: “At what stage/age are children able to take in different concepts of cultural identity?” helped sharpen the focus of inquiry. At different museums, frameworks were applied at different exhibit planning phases in both informal and relatively formal ways. Related articles and references were collected and incorporated.

Developing the frameworks was not a simple task. When the developmental framework was a museum’s first, a great deal of time and work was invested before the value of the framework was apparent. When a framework’s function had previously been served by referencing curriculum standards on a case-by-case basis for specific components, preparing an entire framework in advance initially seemed like a daunting task. And even when a developmental framework was already integrated into exhibit planning as a tool to focus on the audience, the focus shifted from curriculum standards to social and physical readiness.

While the process of reading and synthesizing material helped internalize it and revealed the framework’s value, it also posed the challenge of getting buy-in from others not as directly involved but who would apply it, such as outside contractors. Teams expressed concern about and worked to avoid typecasting and stereotyping and worked to be respectful of cultures. Finally, given the multiple demands of any exhibit planning project, the developmental frameworks often competed for project teams’ time and attention .

#### A ROBUST VARIETY FROM THE FIELD

While the six frameworks for the projects all take similar information for children five-to-twelve years old and relate it to their developing an awareness and understanding of culture in informal learning settings, the array of frameworks demonstrates a robust variety from the field. This variety is valuable and instructive. Not only does it provide a variety of tools for this round of cultural exhibits, but it also expands the field’s understanding of developmental appropriateness and helps bridge the gap between theory and practice.

All the frameworks are grounded in theory and research. They focus on the child’s development and apply this focus to exhibit components and activities. Each has its own blend of factors and its own emphasis on the links forged between theory and practice. Each delivers its combination effectively through different tool formats. Taken together, the array provides a variety of models and starting points

for developmental frameworks as well as rich content on children's cultural understandings.

Deeply rooted in theory and research, Madison and Austin's shared framework was developed by University of Wisconsin professors, Hardin L.K. Coleman and Michael J. Karcher. A somewhat scholarly approach based on a review of literature on children's cognitive development, the framework has three parts. A profile sets out four developmental assumptions (cognitive capability, role of context, etc.) about age-relevant patterns for learning about culture and draws implications for exhibits. Related terms (learning culture, learning about culture, etc) are defined. Finally, the authors propose three age-based phases of cultural understanding. Exhibit implications for each phase serve as general guidelines with broad application to interactive cultural experiences for children.

A shared review of the literature by Selinda Research Associates for Brooklyn Children's Museum, Minnesota Children's Museum and The Children's Museum, Seattle, provided a starting point for two other frameworks. The review focused on what is known about perceptions of Japanese people and Japanese culture among American children in the larger context of children's development of understanding themselves, other people and other cultures.

Drawing on the literature review, BCM created a framework that examined developmental changes across multiple dimensions. BCM's framework tracked changes in key cultural understandings (understanding self, understanding place, etc.) and changes in children's interests and subject areas such as social studies and natural science that relate closely to the context and content of the exhibit across four age groups.

Several frameworks focus on the link between developmental characteristics and exhibit experiences. CMOM's framework is based on developmental characteristics in three domains (cognitive, social/psychological and motor) selected for culturally related understandings and skills and separated into groups by grades. Developmental characteristics are linked to generally appropriate activities and, in turn, are related to general types of experiences available in the exhibit.

The frameworks developed by both MCM/TCM and TCM/CCM make exhibit-specific connections to developmental characteristics. The TCM/CCM framework relates development of the target audience to exhibit messages and specific interpretive strategies. The MCM/TCM framework connects social developmental abilities for different stages with stages of cultural understanding and specific

exhibit components. It then connects these with developmentally appropriate scaffolding questions that relate to a component or activity.

The Children's Museum of Houston's framework emphasizes application and the measurement potential of the tool. Its approach focuses on what children should be exposed to as they develop into citizens respectful of others who are different from them and ready to collaborate within a global system. The tool creates a 0-3 scale to evaluate the degree to which a particular exhibit component displays these characteristics.

#### FRAMEWORKS AND THE WORK THEY DO

In general, the frameworks have served as tools for clarity and focus. They clarified thinking about audience, goals and content; about why this story and why these parts; and about a particular approach to cultural exhibits. Frameworks helped establish and maintain a focus on the audience, starting with where they are, where their interests are and their readiness. In some cases the framework sparked a shift from making choices intuitively to articulating an overall approach. The result was a more deliberate and powerful alignment of goals, objectives, messages and activities. Finally frameworks provided clarity in refining the interpretive plan, through selecting and fine-tuning strategies congruent with children's developmental understandings.

Frameworks also yielded new insights into cultural exhibits for children that are soundly developmental. For instance, the Coleman-Karcher review concludes that there's a developmental sequence, though not age based. Instead the sequence is based on experience as well as social-cognitive maturity that affects what cultural concepts and content children of any age can grasp. Similarly, social and physical readiness, may determine whether children will actually engage with exhibit experiences as much or more than cognitive readiness. Finally, the younger the child, the more important adult scaffolding is as a means to make content and concepts available.

In a field characterized by *learning through doing*, it is not surprising that the power of the developmental framework appears to be both in the process and the product. Immersion in the literature, linking developmental characteristics with exhibit activities and interaction among team members while developing the framework helped internalize the framework and facilitate application. The final product, whether a literature review, matrix or measurement rubric, served as an external and shared document for large and diverse teams to reinforce and apply.

During this round of exhibit planning, frameworks served in a variety of ways and at different points in the planning process.

- Goal Adjustment. Frameworks helped bring exhibit goals in line with children's development, for instance distinguishing between *appreciating* another culture and *positive exposure* to another culture.
- Theory Clarification. The process of translating theory into a practical framework made theories more concrete, more relevant to the audience and the content and more accessible to team members.
- Experience Shaping. Frameworks helped shape specific exhibit activities for developmental fit. Shaping increases the likelihood that a child of a particular age or stage of development will engage in an experience and grasp its message and was used during conceptual as well as schematic planning.
- Diagnostic Tool. Frameworks helped examine the mix of proposed exhibit experiences. Application to specific interpretive strategies indicated where they were stronger or weaker. Dovetailing developmental characteristics with a learning styles matrix showed the variety and balance of experiences for the targeted audience.
- Prioritizing. At any point in the planning process, but especially during construction cost estimating, frameworks helped in deciding which activities would be carried forward based on how well they served the age range.
- Baseline Information. Reviewing components or activities for developmental fit provided a baseline to be used with the summative/remedial evaluation.
- A Resource. Samples of developmental timelines along with articles and books on children's understanding culture became references for more targeted research on a specific concept, skill or cultural content.

#### LOOKING AHEAD AND ACROSS THE FIELD

Beyond the current exhibits for which they were developed, the frameworks have a role to play and work to do. They will help craft exciting, engaging experiences about people and cultures that young children may now only meet briefly but will undoubtedly live with in the future.

Looking ahead, the nine museums that have developed these frameworks may find them useful as:

- a resource for training staff, volunteers and classroom teachers on cultural topics;
- a tool for planning future cultural exhibits and programs;
- a template for developmental frameworks on other topics such as the human body, outer space or music;
- a perspective integrated with front-end evaluation findings into a single tool;

- a starting point for a comprehensive developmental framework to guide their institution's educational work.

For the *Go East!* initiative and host museums, the frameworks serves as:

- a resource for training host venues at InterActivity 2004 and 2006; and
- a tool for planning related cultural programs at exhibit venues.

For all museums and the children's museum field as a whole, the frameworks can serve as:

- a reference on cultural exhibits and programs;
- a communication tool about children's development and the educational value of cultural exhibits for sharing internally and externally;
- a model for translating theory into practice; and
- a tool for broader use in the field applied to other children's exhibits and programs on cultural topics.

As first generation tools and works in progress, the potential of the frameworks is not yet fully apparent. Sometimes developed in parallel with the exhibits they were to shape, the frameworks are still in the prototype stage. Furthermore, the products for which they have been created, interactive cultural exhibits for young children and their families, have yet to meet their audience, travel to different cities and undergo evaluation. Finally, application of the frameworks in new situations or their evolution into new tools can only be explored with time.

But just as the *Go East!* initiative itself has changed the definition of interactive cultural exhibits for children, the set of developmental frameworks it has generated seems also likely to change how children's museums plan for children in cultural and other exhibits.

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