

# Entry and Emergent Agendas of Adults Visiting an Aquarium in Family Groups

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## ABSTRACT

Understanding visitors' agendas is important in providing insights about learning experiences in informal settings, particularly if we consider learning to be both a product (what they learn) and a process (how they learn it). Accordingly, a handful of studies have investigated the impact of visitors' agendas on learning. However, little attention has been directed to investigating the impact of individual and collective agendas on the nature of the visit experience for the adult members of family groups, or the dynamics and evolution of these agendas during and after a visit to an informal setting. This article examines the roles that personal agendas play in shaping and framing the aquarium experiences of the adult members of 13 family groups visiting the Vancouver Aquarium Marine Science Centre in Canada. It explores the dynamic and changing character of entry and emergent agendas within the family group context and the factors that constitute and shape such agendas. The roles of these agendas in the overall on-site learning experience of the adult members of the participating family groups, and the longitudinal impact of the aquarium visit are further discussed.

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## INTRODUCTION

The diverse and complex outcomes of learning opportunities that visitors encounter in museums, science centers, aquariums, and similar informal settings, are the result of a multiplicity of factors amongst which the physical context, personal background, social conditions and interactions, prior experiences, and random factors such as casual or unexpected encounters, have been acknowledged as crucial (Falk & Dierking, 2000). However, predetermined agendas that visitors take with them to these settings are important in influencing the way they experience a visit to an informal setting (Anderson, Piscitelli, Weier, & Everett, 2003; Falk, Moussouri, & Coulson, 1998; Moussouri, 2003). Families constitute more than half of all visitors to many of these settings and are therefore a major audience (Blud, 1990; Diamond, 1986; McManus, 1987). It is thus important to understand the role of personal and collective agendas to elucidate how family members approach and negotiate their visit.

## **Families and Informal Learning**

The family, as the basic unit of socialization (Kane, 1987), is one of the many social environments where informal, self-directed, and incidental learning can occur for all group members. For this reason, the attention directed at improving the overall learning experience of family groups through research, evaluation, and programming is well justified.

McManus (1994) described family groups as intergenerational social units, meaning that this demographic includes adults and children of a wide range of ages and characteristics. In the context of the informal learning setting, families have been characterized as groups sharing a unique culture, knowledge, values, and experiences (Borun, 2002), and as groups that consistently behave differently from other museum visitors (e.g., school groups and peer groups; McManus, 1994). Sandifer (1997) identified families as the demographic that spends the most time in individual exhibitions and in the museum setting as a whole, and McManus (1988) suggested that among the groups containing children, families are those who have the longest conversations and are likely to interact with exhibits for a longer time. It has been acknowledged that the social interactions among family members visiting informal settings take place as a reciprocal activity, in which both adults and children participate, and by which families collectively build a social identity.

## **Agendas**

Visitors to informal learning settings have agendas that include a wide variety of elements such as motivations, intended goals, and visit strategies. Moussouri (1997) defined agenda as the set of motivations, expectations, and desires with which visitors enter an informal setting, and proposed that agendas can be conceived as having two dimensions: motivations (reasons for visiting) and strategies (which may be unfocused, moderately focused, or focused). Falk et al. (1998) suggested that these strategies affect the length of the visit. It might also be argued, however, that the amount of time assigned to the visit could influence the way in which family groups plan to conduct their visit.

Moussouri (1997) further posited that prior knowledge and experience are critical factors for the construction of visitors' personal and collective agendas. Moreover, researchers have stressed the role of prior experiences, emotions, memories, background, the exhibition itself, and personal understandings in the process of assigning reference and meaning to the exhibit content (e.g., Anderson, Piscitelli, Weier, Everett, & Tayler, 2002; Boggs, 1977; Falk & Adelman, 2003; Moussouri, 2003; Pekarik, Doering, & Karns, 1999). Others have acknowledged that what visitors bring to a gallery strongly determines what they do, talk about, and what they will take away from their visits (Anderson et al., 2003; Falk, 2006; Falk et al., 1998; Moussouri, 2003; Packer & Ballantyne, 2002). Agendas resulting from prior experiences and personal meanings are important to consider particularly when talking about families as visitors, given that family groups share a rich background of prior knowledge and collective experience (Borun, Chambers, & Cleghorn, 1996). In fact, Diamond (1986) suggested that family groups choose the exhibitions they want to explore in a rather idiosyncratic way, which is a reflection of a set of pre-established desires and interests.

Despite the importance of agendas in shaping the outcomes of a visit to an informal setting, few research studies have investigated the impact of visitor agendas on the

learning outcomes of such visitation. Falk et al. (1998) reported that adult visitors' pre-visit agendas directly influence their in-museum behavior and learning, and they also conclude that most museum adult visitors bring an educational or entertainment agenda, and that the nature of visitors' motivation significantly affects how and what is learnt. Moussouri (2003) studied the agendas of family groups; her analysis demonstrates that visitors' recollections about a visit are clearly related to their agenda(s) as well as to their educational background and prior understandings. Falk (2006) on the other hand, suggested that visitors' agendas are strongly determined by people's identities, and that such agendas directly impact behavior and learning, and that both identities and agendas are highly idiosyncratic.

Researchers have aimed to categorize visitors' agendas based mainly on the nature of people's motivations for visiting informal settings. Prentice, Davis, and Beeho (1997) identified the following five motivation categories for museum visitation: having a day out; getting away from routine; spending time with family and friends; broadening one's general knowledge; and satisfying one's curiosity. In their study, Adelman, Falk, and James (2000) distinguished the following reasons for people to visit an aquarium: sense of place (people like aquariums, venue's reputation, outing recommended by others); education (people want to see fish and wildlife, describe their visit as connected to their personal interests and hobbies, or consider it important for their children to see things that they have not seen before and be exposed to new experiences); practical reasons (being in town for a couple of days or having time to kill); social motivations; and entertainment. Moussouri (1997) suggested that visitors' agendas can be classified as place (destination is emblematic of a locale), education (aesthetic, informational, or cultural content), life-cycle (reproducing past experiences), social event (family day out), entertainment (have fun), and practical issues (weather, proximity). In addition, Combs (1999) categorized motivations as recreation (escape from everyday life, day trip, relax); beauty (joy, appreciation); amusement (fun); social (create memories); history (fantasy, going back in time); education (guided experience); and learning (self growth). Packer and Ballantyne (2002) identified five categories of visitors' motivations, namely learning and discovery, passive enjoyment, restoration, social interaction, and self-fulfillment. Finally, Pekarik et al. (1999) indicated that visitors' expected experiences can be classified as object experiences (seeing the real thing, seeing rare/valuable things, being moved by beauty); cognitive experiences (gaining information or knowledge, expanding understandings); introspective experiences (recalling past experiences, feeling connections, imagining places); and social experiences (spending time with family and friends, seeing one's children learning new things).

### **Agendas of Family Groups**

Visitors enter informal settings with particular agendas that respond to a broad range of interests, backgrounds, and motivations, but in general terms, people visit these places to participate actively, engage their senses, socialize with family and friends, acquire information, have fun, and relax through a memorable encounter that removes them from the everyday world (Combs, 1999; Hood & Roberts, 1994; Prentice et al., 1997). Families in particular have been identified as a group that visits informal settings seeking pleasure or enjoyment, along with expectations for an educational or informative experience (McManus, 1994). Families look for satisfaction not only from the exhibits

displayed, but also from the experience of functioning as an intimate social unit in a public space (McManus, 1994). However, Hilke (1987) suggested that generally, families visit museums and other informal settings foremost to have a good family outing, thus relegating any other outcome to a secondary plane. According to Hilke, the prevalent primary agenda of satisfaction and enjoyment that families bring to the informal setting has to be fulfilled in order for other agendas (e.g., learning) to operate.

Moussouri (2003) and Hilke (1987) asserted that in the case of family groups, personal and group agendas operate simultaneously thus influencing and modeling each other, and affecting the behavior of the group and the outcomes of the visit. According to Moussouri (2003), family members are actively involved in planning their visit strategies and in a continuous negotiation and refinement of their personal and collective agendas. Anderson et al. (2003) suggested that the agendas that young children hold have the potential to profoundly affect the learning outcomes of field trip visits to museums. They further suggest that if teachers and museum educators attend to children's personal agendas and negotiate these as part of the experience, the museum visit can result in increased learning outcomes and more rewarding museum experiences. However, more research is necessary in order to further explicate the nature and impact of the agendas that self-directed groups of visitors, such as family groups, bring with them to the informal setting.

### **Aims of the Study**

This article is based on a larger empirical work that examined the on-site and longitudinal roles of personal and collective agendas of the adult members of family groups during an aquarium experience. The aim was to better understand how and what visiting families learn in and from an aquarium, and how this learning manifests over time. In this article we address three questions:

1. What is the nature of family groups' pre-defined (entry) agendas when visiting an aquarium;
2. What are the factors that influence and modify these agendas during the course of the visit; and
3. What is the role of entry and emergent agendas in visitors' subsequent activities in contexts other than the aquarium?

### **METHOD**

This qualitative study used a multiple instrumental case study approach (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). This research methodology permits understanding of phenomena (i.e., the role of agendas in museum visitation) through detailed examination of particular cases (Stake, 1995). This methodological approach permitted a critical examination, description, interpretation, and understanding of visitors' intentions, motivations, feelings, thoughts, impressions, and recollections. We chose to implement a qualitative approach because we aimed to enhance and deepen our understandings of the way in which families, as social and dynamic groups, negotiate personal and collective agendas as they experience an aquarium visit.



**Figure 1.** *Boy with shark.* Photo courtesy of the Vancouver Aquarium, by Hans Sipma.

### Research Site

The study was carried out at the Vancouver Aquarium Marine Science Centre in Canada. This location was chosen for the research because of its popularity amongst locals and foreign visitors, and in particular for the family group demographic. Families actually represent almost 50% of the total visitors to the Vancouver Aquarium. The aquarium offers visitors of all ages a wide range of activities related to marine life, ecology, and conservation that altogether account for a potentially enriching learning experience for family groups. At the time of the study, the Vancouver Aquarium's public spaces comprised six indoor galleries, five exhibits in an outdoor area, a children's gallery, and underwater viewing areas (Figure 1).

### Participants

Data collection took place from January to February 2005. For this study, we used a non-random purposive sample of casual visitors (Palys, 2003). We intentionally sought participants who met the criteria for inclusion in this study and did not aim at formal representation of the entire demographic. For the purpose of this study, a *family group* was defined as an intergenerational group of people whose members share close relational ties. This working definition allowed the inclusion of volunteer families consisting of parents and children and volunteer families consisting of grandparents and children. Some researchers suggest that the expectations and behaviors of these two kinds of family groups are somewhat different (Leinhardt & Knutson, 2006; Moussouri, 2003), thus providing an opportunity to investigate the aquarium experiences of a diverse set of families.

Only English-speaking family groups consisting of at least two adult members and one child less than 11 years of age were considered as potential participants. These criteria for inclusion were established bearing in mind that the research design demanded visitors' time, and thus groups including more than one adult would be more likely to agree to take part in the study because childcare would be less of an issue for them. Family groups with young children were targeted over families with teenagers because we wanted to

**Table 1.** Description of the participating family groups

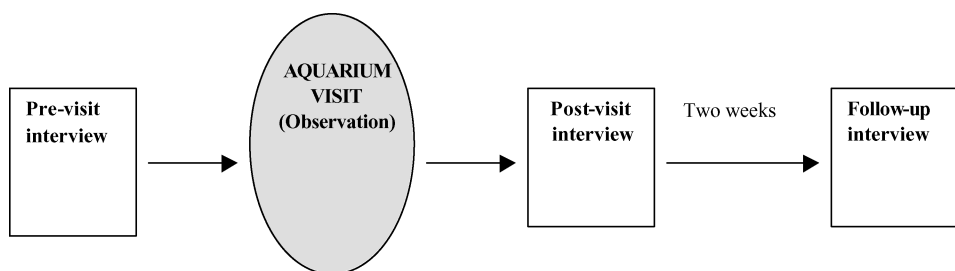
Family group	Composition		Relationship	Participants in the on-site interviews	Participant in the follow-up interview
	Adults	Children			
1	3	2	Parents, grandmother & children	Parents & children	Father
2	2	1	Parents & child	All	Mother
3	2	1	Grandparents & child	All	Grandmother
4	2	3	Parents & children	All	Mother
5	2	2	Parents & children	All	Mother
6	2	1	Parents & child	All	Mother
7	2	1	Parents & child	All	Mother
8	2	1	Parents & child	All	Mother
9	2	1	Parents & child	Parents	Mother
10	2	2	Parents & children	All	Mother
11	2	3	Parents & children	Parents	Mother
12	3	1	Parents, grandmother & child	All	Grandmother
13	3	2	Mother, grandmothers & children	All	Mother

explore the role of adults’ personal and individual agendas when overtly interacting and communicating with their children. The final sample consisted of a total of 13 family groups, which included 28 adults and 21 children. None of the participating families held annual visitor passes to the Vancouver Aquarium, hence they were not frequent visitors of this venue. Only one of the families was from outside of the Greater Vancouver area.

As indicated in Table 1, of the 13 family groups who took part in this study, five groups comprised two parents and one child; four groups comprised two parents and two or three children; one group comprised two grandparents and one child; and three groups included members of all three generations. All children were under 8 years of age.

**Procedures**

We used self-report methods as the principal mode of inquiry on three separate occasions (Figure 2). Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were carried out with each of the participating families before and immediately after the visit to the aquarium; we audio-recorded all interviews for subsequent analysis. At least two adults of each of the groups participated in these on-site interviews, and the children of 11 out of the 13 participating family groups were present during the on-site interviews. However, children’s comments



**Figure 2.** Research design used for data collection.

and observations were not taken into consideration for analysis purposes because of the focus of this study on adult experiences. Follow-up semi-structured phone interviews were implemented two weeks after the visit. Given the one-to-one nature of phone interviews, only one self-selected volunteer adult per family took part in the follow-up interview. It turned out that in 12 of the 13 families, the volunteers were females, these being the principal caregivers of the children in their family groups.

Semi-structured interviews permitted us to elicit a breadth of qualitative data from participants, as well as to probe emergent ideas. When specific information was required from participants, such as demographics, a structured set of questions was implemented. Such demographic data included place of birth, place of residence, history of aquarium visitation, and age and gender of the children. We used an interview protocol that brought forth reflection and information regarding adult members' personal and collective agendas and the role of those agendas, interests, and perceptions in shaping the learning outcomes of the aquarium experience. Some examples of the questions included in the interview protocols are provided below.

Pre-visit interview:

- Do you or any member of your family have in mind a particular intention/reason/interest for visiting the Aquarium today?
- How do you decide where to go on your visits to places like this?

Post-visit interview:

- Were there any factors that may have altered your initial expectations for the visit?
- During the visit, did you or your children develop a particular interest in any exhibits or gallery in the aquarium?
- Follow-up interview:
- Do you have in mind any particular activity you would like to do with your family that could be connected to the Aquarium experience?

In addition, unobtrusive on-site observation was carried out as the participants visited the aquarium. This information was deemed important as a means for data triangulation, which enhanced the trustworthiness of this study. This information was also used as a valuable prompt for stimulated recall (Calderhead, 1981) during the post-visit and follow-up interviews. Observations were recorded as field notes, and focused on behaviors, critical family interactions, and an overview of each participating family group's visit to the aquarium. The observations contributed to a holistic interpretation of data and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study.

### **Data Analysis**

The three sets of interviews for each of the 13 participating families, as well as the field notes from the on-site observations, were fully transcribed. Data analysis involved the search for patterns, unique insights, and themes across the pre-visit, post-visit, and follow-up interview responses and observational data. We assigned each family group (FG) a number that corresponds to the order in which that group was recruited at the Vancouver Aquarium; a system was implemented to identify family members (mothers: M, fathers: F, grandmothers: GM, grandfathers: GF, and researcher: R). The identification

system did not include child categories because the focus of the study was on adult learning in the context of family groups. All interview data were coded according to emergent conceptual categories that were established through direct interpretation of instances (Stake, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Based on the emergent categories, we were able to identify and aggregate recurring themes across the data sets, harmonious with the objectives of the study.

Our emergent categories and themes were constructed in a way that captured recurring patterns across data on the one hand, and highlighted the particularities of each of the cases on the other. The coding and categorization process was followed by two levels of analysis: (a) a cross-case analysis involving all the cases, and (b) a deeper examination of particular cases when a relevant outcome was found.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

It can be argued that the aquarium experience starts when visitors first conceive their future visit. What they do prior to, during, and after the conception of the aquarium visit, can also powerfully affect the ways in which family groups experience a day at the aquarium. In the following sections we discuss the outcomes of the study focusing on entry agendas (motivations, intentions, and strategies); factors that influence and modify entry agendas; agendas for future family activities; and the impact of entry and emergent agendas on the family members' learning experiences.

### **Entry Agendas**

Overall, families' entry agendas for the visit stated during the pre-visit interview were confirmed by the observations made during their visit. All the family groups were observed attending to what they had declared as their intentions for the visit, or ignoring what they had explicitly outlined as not appealing for them. These entry agendas can be understood as a combination of motivations, intentions, and strategies, and they are likely to constantly change and adjust over the course of the visit. There are several factors that contribute to this constant reconstruction and negotiation of agendas.

#### *Motivations*

Adults had multiple and diverse entry motivations or reasons for deciding to visit the Vancouver Aquarium. We established the following motivation categories (see Table 2) based on the information obtained during the pre-visit interviews, and informed by the works of Combs (1999), Moussouri (1997), Packer and Ballantyne (2002), and Pekarik et al. (1999) on visitors' agendas, motivations, and satisfying experiences in museums. The different types of motivations are presented in decreasing order of popularity among the participating family groups. These categories can come into play simultaneously, that is, adult family members often came to the aquarium with multiple motivations. The motivation categories are discussed in greater detail below, and illustrated with excerpts from pre-visit interviews.

The adult members of the participating family groups had multiple motivations for visiting the aquarium. Such motivations were crucial elements in defining the nature of the agendas the participating families brought with them to the aquarium. Based on participants' motivations, it can be argued that overall, the adults of the participating families entered the venue with a three fold recreation–learning–social motivated agenda. This outcome supports prior claims that when visiting a museum, family groups look for both

**Table 2.** Adults' entry motivations for visiting the aquarium

Entry motivation (reason)	Number of cases
Recreation (escape from everyday life, break the routine, day trip, relaxation, enjoyment, entertainment, amusement)	13
Learning (offering others a learning experience, satisfying interests of others and oneself, gaining information or knowledge, expanding understandings, appreciation, seeing "the real thing")	
• For their children	13
• For themselves	12
Social event (family day out, create memories)	11
Life cycle (reproducing past experiences)	6
Practical issues (weather, proximity, safe place for kids, having coupons)	5
Introspection (recalling past experiences, feeling connections, imagining places)	3
Place (destination is emblematic of a locale)	1

collective enjoyment and an educational or informative experience (e.g., Borun, 2002; Falk et al., 1998; McManus, 1994; Prentice et al., 1997), and that they also seek a social event (Hilke, 1987). The following excerpt from one of the pre-visit interviews exemplifies how combined motivations concur in one family's entry agenda.

R: What do you expect your family to obtain from this visit?

F4: Just a fun day.

M4: A fun day, a day out, something for them [the children] to look at.

F4: That they don't see normally.

M4: Get out of you know, watching TV, and yeah, have fun.

The adults in all participating families had declared during the pre-visit interview they were at the aquarium that day for recreational reasons. At the same time, they affirmed that offering their children a learning opportunity was also a motivation for visiting the aquarium as a group. Furthermore, only the adults in one family group did not claim to be at the venue for personal educational interests. It can thus be said that besides attending to their children's own interests, which itself constitutes a rationale for adults, the participating grown ups were also prompted to visit the aquarium by personal or individual motives or purposes. The following quotes illustrate the way in which adults perceived the aquarium visit to be of educational value for the children in their families.

M2: She's been interested in fish lately a lot. We wanted to show her the real thing, now that she's been watching 'Finding Nemo,' right. So then she sees fish, but we thought we'll bring her to see the real ones. [Later] For me anyway it is important that she sees the real things. That she understands that they are alive and they are natural. To see them at least as natural as possible, because not all is just commercialised cartoons and toys. I really wanted her to see whales and dolphins for real.

M4: Yeah, even if they are running from spot to spot, it is still a learning experience, regardless. They are not just sitting watching 'Square Bob Square Pants' all day. They are learning, at the same time as having fun. And as I said, it is also a matter of having respect for the environment. And that is really it; that is the most important for us.

The adults of eleven families also expressed that having a family day out was amongst the reasons for them visiting the aquarium that day. This outcome supports McManus's (1994) statement that visitors place high value on the social dimension of a visit to a museum-like setting, and that families in particular seek satisfaction from the experience of operating as an intimate social unit in a public space. The results are also consistent with Prentice et al. (1997) and Hilke's (1987) assertion that museum visitors with children are very likely to consider social motivations as highly valuable for the visit.

The lifecycle motivations that include offering the children the opportunity to experience what parents lived as children themselves and reproducing past experiences, was also a motivation for six of the families. These adults stated that they wanted to fulfill the desire to re-visit the aquarium many years after their previous visitation, as well as have their children experience the same.

F2: I've always liked the aquarium, animals and stuff like that. I haven't been here for a while, so I always have wanted to come back, so I think this is a great opportunity for the kids. We also want to show her [his daughter]. We figured this could be interesting to her.

[Later in the same interview]

M2: Because that's pretty much what you do as a parent, is show her all the things that you liked as a child, right? So. I want to touch little things, I hope the tidal pool is still there. See the shows and it'll be fun.

Practical issues such as adverse weather conditions on the day of the visit, having coupons, and considering the aquarium a safe place for children also influenced the adults' motivations for visiting the Vancouver Aquarium in five different families. Introspection agendas were also brought up by the participants. Recalling past experiences associated with marine environments or having an affective connection to the ocean were some of the adults' personal reasons for visiting the aquarium as conveyed in the following comment.

M10: Like a lot of the BC [British Columbia, Canada] stuff, we kind of grew up with that, surfers and divers and things like that.

Only in one of the families did the adults mention that they were motivated by the fact that the aquarium is included in the list of places to visit when in Vancouver.

### *Intentions*

During the pre-visit interview, multiple entry intentions or goals of the visit were also identified by the adult participants (Table 3). All the participants declared personal interests in seeing particular exhibits, and they also acknowledged their intentions to provide their children a learning opportunity. In addition, the adults in 11 family groups stated that it was their intention to have fun as a group on the day of the visit. It was not always clear which motivations were associated with specific intentions (i.e., intentions to see particular animals might be part of a learning or an introspective motivation, or both). However, many of the entry intentions can be clearly interpreted as contributing to the learning, social, and entertainment motives that families brought with them.

**Table 3.** Adults' entry intentions for visiting the aquarium

Entry intention (goal)	Number of cases
See particular exhibits	13
Show and teach the children	13
Spend a fun family day	11
See as much as possible	4
Gain information/knowledge themselves	3

### Strategies

Strategies involved aspects such as tactics for getting around and making decisions during the visit, amount of time spent at the aquarium, and means of optimizing the use of such time. The strategies or plans families implemented during their visit to the aquarium varied from group to group. The participating family groups made use of diverse resources in order to orient themselves in the aquarium, move around the venue, and ultimately structure their visit around their entry and emergent agendas. In all cases, these strategies and resources shaped participants' experiences at the Vancouver Aquarium.

Amongst the elements that played an important role in shaping participants' visitation strategies, memories and prior knowledge of the venue based on previous visits were particularly relevant. Overall, families with no prior experiences at the Vancouver Aquarium were more likely to conduct their visit with an unfocused agenda (Moussouri, 1997) and to stay at the aquarium longer than families with a history of prior visitation to the venue (Table 4).

The following comment was made by a mother of a family with history of prior visitation to the Vancouver Aquarium, who also stated that they had planned for a 3-hour visit during the pre-visit interview. This visitation strategy was coded as non-focused, because it did not include any indication of a particular focus of interest or plan for the visit.

M10: Yeah. And besides it's not the only visit, we don't have to see everything or go to every tank, we'll just go where there is something interesting for them [the children].

The kind of strategies that were coded as moderately focused included the intention of attending to particular exhibits or shows, but also the flexibility of finding unexpected attractions:

R: Is there any particular exhibit you'd like to see?

M: No. I know it's a very good aquarium . . . I'd really like to see the tropical fish. And I'm

**Table 4.** Adults' entry strategies for visiting the aquarium

Entry strategy (plan)	Number of cases		
	With prior experience	With no prior experience	Total
Focused	1		1
Moderately focused	6	1	7
Non-focused	2	3	5

really looking forward to the touch-pools, I saw there were some of those here and I figure we can touch stuff there. So just to see stuff and walk around, really.

A strategy was considered to be focused when an explicit and concrete visitation plan was uttered:

GF3: To show her the octopus and we'll see the whales, and what was the other one? Sharks?

The behavioral roles for leading family groups through the galleries and selecting what to see and do (leading strategies), were often rotated among group members as the visit progressed. Thus, in almost every family case, children and adults were observed leading their family groups at some points of the visit. This outcome indicates a constant interplay between guiding interests and agendas and suggests that personal and group agendas constantly interact and influence each other since, as Moussouri (2003) asserted, they operate concurrently.

### **Factors that Influence and Modify Entry Agendas**

There were instances when it was possible to elucidate the role of personal history in the definition of individual and collective agendas. Such prior experiences included activities that, having been carried out prior to the visit to the aquarium, influenced or shaped the declared motivations, intentions, and strategies of some of the participating adults. Prior visitation to the Vancouver Aquarium was one of the most common acknowledged past experiences that influenced present agendas. At least one adult in seven different family groups identified a previous visit to the aquarium as an agenda-defining factor. As well, for the adults of five families, past activities and personal memories concerning the ocean and wildlife (e.g., snorkelling, diving, and traveling) inspired particular entry agendas. Previously seen TV programs and documentaries, having information on what is on display at the aquarium beforehand, and learning about a child's newly developed interests and capacities also influenced what adults of participating family groups considered as part of the agenda for the visit. The following excerpt is part of an exchange between members of one family group, conveying the role of past experiences in determining what visitors expect to obtain from visiting an informal setting.

F1: Is there a beluga exhibit here? I would like to see the belugas, I have never seen them.

M1: Yeah, we've never seen them.

F1: I've only seen them on TV, yeah. I saw a special on I think the Discovery Channel. About whales and dolphins, sharks too. But mostly about dolphins and something on belugas, so I would like to see them.

It became evident during the post-visit interview that even when adults entered the aquarium with agendas that appeared structured and somewhat uniform (i.e., having a nice day out as a family), there were multiple factors within the aquarium that influenced and modified these entry agendas. Also, there is evidence that points to a continuous negotiation of agendas among family group members. Yet the dynamic nature of entry agendas did not imply that family groups did not meet their original expectations for the

visit, but rather that emergent agendas came into play because of a number of on-site factors, which we identified as intrinsic and extrinsic.

Intrinsic factors included the development of a particular interest, fascination or concern during the visit. Extrinsic factors included aspects related to the age of the children (i.e., attention span, restlessness, and endurance), show times, weather conditions, and levels of crowdedness in the galleries and exhibitions. Across all 13 cases, these on-site factors caused personal and collective agendas to adjust, develop, and diversify in unique manners, thus reinforcing the idea that agendas are dynamic and flexible. However, according to the observations and participants' remarks made during the post-visit interview, entry agendas were largely fulfilled. This outcome leads us to contend that there are core elements of the entry agendas that are actually held constant, and these ultimately frame and shape the set of experiences that families have during their visits. The following interview excerpts illustrate this process:

[From pre-visit interview]

M4: I actually don't want to see the whales here. That's not why we are here.

R: Why are you here?

M4: To see the fish, yeah. I don't want to see whales. Well, the belugas maybe, but I don't know. I feel better about them than I do about the killer whales. They used to be here and I didn't like it at all, it was sad.

[From post-visit interview]

F4: We didn't do any shows, and I don't think. . .

M4: I don't like shows anyway.

F4: No, but the kids don't sit through the show.

M4: No. Like what are the shows? With the seals and. . .

R: Well, there is this dolphin show and then the beluga show, and they try to show the natural behaviors of these animals.

F4: They are probably too young for that, so. They would sit down for a couple of minutes and then get restless and walk around.

M4: No, but I don't really want to show them shows, that's not why I'm here, to see performances. I don't want to see performances by animals; I don't want to see that.

This mother was not interested in seeing any of the shows due to her distress about seeing large animals in captivity. It illustrates how a pre-fixed entry agenda shaped and framed the experience of her family group. The observations confirmed that this family did not attend any of the shows offered by the Vancouver Aquarium.

### **Agendas for Future Family Activities**

During the post-visit interviews, the adults of six different families declared their intention to engage in future activities somehow connected to their visit to the aquarium. In their words, these emerging agendas for upcoming family activities would give them the opportunity to get closer to the ocean. These future agendas involved intentions to dive, surf, see marine animals in the wild, engage in outdoor adventure activities in the ocean, set up fish tanks at home, and research the animals displayed at the aquarium as a means to reinforce the recent experience. The following comment made by the adults of one of the participating families illustrates the point:

M2: I just want to have a tank at home, that is one of my wishes now.

F2: I'd like to be closer to the ocean. I'd like to try and do some diving and stuff like that.

M2: We saw the diving panels. If it wasn't for a 2 year old leading the day, we'd probably had stopped and talked to the people. We picked up a card from a guy that was talking about big white sharks and BC's undiscovered shipwrecks, so those are the things we were interested in and that we'd like to go to.

During the follow-up interviews two weeks after the visit took place, the adults of all the participating families expressed their sustained intentions of engaging in future activities that they considered to be connected to their aquarium experience. Up to the time of the follow-up interviews, such plans had not yet been carried out, except for one family who had gone back to the Vancouver Aquarium.

F4: Well, we went back again.

R: You did? Really? When did you go back?

F4: Just yesterday, because we actually had some friends in town, so we went back again.

Whether these agendas for future activities were an exclusive result of the aquarium experience is hard to determine. However, according to some of the adult participants, visiting the aquarium as part of a family group had a strong impact on their desires and intentions to involve their families and themselves in activities that concern the ocean and/or marine animals. For some visitors, the visit could have been the starting point for a variety of future plans and family activities, whereas for others, the visit could have reinforced a prior interest or be part of a larger agenda.

### **Agendas and Learning**

The common recreation agenda did not prevent adults from bringing with them and fulfilling a learning agenda. Elsewhere we discuss the nature of adult learning resulting from a family experience at the Vancouver Aquarium (Briseño-Garzón, Anderson, & Anderson, 2006). The claim that adults learned in a variety of domains (i.e., the cognitive, the affective, and the social) as a result of their collective visit to the aquarium, at the same time as having an enjoyable day out with their families, supports Falk et al.'s (1998) assertion that most visitors do not see a real conflict between having fun and learning something at the same time. Yet, in most of the family groups that took part in this study, the entry and emergent agendas had an effect on both the ways of conducting the visit and the learning outcomes of the experience, at the individual and collective levels.

An example of a personal entry agenda affecting individual learning is the case of a father who clearly intended to learn about beluga whales during his family visit to the aquarium, having been motivated by a documentary he saw days before the visit. This visitor valued the aquarium experience based on a prior event. Accordingly, this personal agenda shaped his intended learning experience at the aquarium.

F1: Yeah. The dorsal, not the dorsal but the back flipper, the tail of the whales, how they use it to propel themselves up and then how they stay still in that position, like upside down, floating. And how they use this, the fins to move back and forth.

M1: Yeah, I didn't know that. I didn't see that documentary that he saw, but I read it in one of the displays. But I had no idea.

In a different family group, encouraged by positive personal memories of past events, the adults' entry agendas included seeing the local fauna. In this group, the parents shared with their children specific information about the local marine creatures and the geography of the BC Coast (West Canada). The group went together through the explanatory labels of the gallery displaying the local fauna, and at the end of the visit, all the members were able to reconstruct some of the recently acquired knowledge. This case suggests how personal entry agendas can influence the learning experience at the collective level.

Girl10: And about the sea cucumbers, that they. . .

F10: Yeah, the sea cucumbers, has anyone seen a sea cucumber? They throw themselves out if they're threatened. They can do that, it's a nice defence.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The outcomes of this study indicate that the participating family groups visited the Vancouver Aquarium with predefined entry agendas that can be understood in terms of visitors' motivations, intentions, and strategies. Also, this study shows that participants' interests and what they looked forward to obtaining from the aquarium experience were shaped by particular and personally relevant prior events and knowledge. This study thus supports Falk, Koran, and Dierking's (1986) claim that prior experiences, personal and social context, and the setting itself are key factors in determining what visitors expect to get from their visits to settings like the aquarium.

The most common agendas identified amongst the family groups who took part in this study included recreational, learning, and social motivations. These three sets of expectations and interests were in play simultaneously as the families visited the Vancouver Aquarium. Although entry agendas initially seemed somewhat homogeneous across the cases (mainly based on recreation, learning, and social motives), these diversified during the visit due to a number of on-site factors (e.g., the development of a particular interest, fascination or concern during the visit; the children's attention span, restlessness, and endurance; show times; weather conditions; and crowdedness). In addition, the study shows that agendas and agenda consolidation was a continuing, dynamic, and non-linear process where multiple events converged and influenced one another. Both the entry and the emergent agendas ultimately played an important role in shaping the learning outcomes of the adult members of the participating family groups and their respective families. Our outcomes are consistent with Falk and Dierking's (2000) assertion that visitors to museums learn as they assimilate the experience in a personally significant way that is defined by episodes that take place before and after the visit.

The study shows that the learning impact of an informal experience not only resides in the experience itself, but also in the days and weeks following the visit. In parallel fashion, agenda diversification not only takes place within the boundaries of the informal setting but also beyond the visit. A day at the aquarium inspired parents to commit to the intention of engaging in future family activities related to the ocean and marine life, intentions that were vividly recognized two weeks after the experience. It is acknowledged that the adults who took part in the follow-up interviews were almost exclusively females, and that their comments and responses represent personal reflections and opinions regarding individual and collective outcomes of the aquarium visit. The extent to which

gender could have played a role in shaping follow-up outcomes is hard to determine. The mediating effects of gender on both on-site and post-visit agendas and behaviors remains a question for future research.

Further realizing how entry and emergent agendas develop and interrelate, and how family members negotiate the strategies and aims of their visits, is necessary to expand our understanding of the impact of agendas on the learning experiences of families. Solely considering that entry agendas shape the learning experience and attending to these entry agendas is not enough to provide positive learning experiences within the informal setting, because emergent agendas seem to be as significant in the progress and outcomes of a visit. Considering that adults play a fundamental role as leaders of their family groups, better understanding how their personal agendas develop and come into play during a visit is a powerful tool for the creation of engaging learning opportunities for all family members. Thus, investigations of family learning in informal settings ought to pay special attention to the personal agendas the adults of family groups bring to the informal setting. This becomes even more relevant if we consider that adults readily learn even when recreational and social agendas and experiences seem to be their focus.

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