Difficult Knowledge and Children's Museums: Programming, Practices, and Principles across the United States and Canada

Full Report

education | YORK UNIVERSITÉ UNIVERSITY | HUNTER The City University of New York | Université Concordia University | FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCE Department of Education | ACM ASSOCIATION OF CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS

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Introduction

This report presents the findings of a survey that examined children's museum programming, practices, and principles in children's museums across the United States and Canada. Specifically, the report considers how children's museums are using programming and practices to engage difficult knowledge and social issues, including racism and discrimination, truth and reconciliation, and culturally relevant and accessible pedagogies. Findings share dominant trends in programming topics, examples of meaningful pedagogical practices, and reflections on challenges and areas of potential improvement in efforts to represent social issues and difficult knowledge with children.

The Research Team

The research team is comprised of 4 education researchers with specializations in social studies and history curriculum, childhood, and disability studies. The team also includes the Director of Field Services and Research of the Association of Children's Museums (ACM).

Research Leads

Lisa Farley is a Professor in the Faculty of Education at York University. Her research examines the status of difficult knowledge in learning from history, the emotional aspects of education, and theories of child development in relation to curriculum and pedagogy.

Debbie Sonu is a Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Hunter College and The Graduate Center at the City University of New York. Her research examines how teachers engage social conflicts and difficult histories with children in public schools.

Sandra Chang-Kredl is an Associate Professor in the Department of Education at Concordia University. Her research explores children's popular culture and play, with a focus on teachers' efforts to support children's understandings of difficult topics such as hate speech and othering.

Gillian Parekh is an Associate Professor and Canada Research Chair in Disability Studies in Education within the Faculty of Education at York University. Her research draws on critical quantitative and institutional ethnographic methods to trace patterns of inequity experienced by children and young people from kindergarten to postsecondary education.

Jennifer Rehkamp is the Senior Director of Field Services and Research at the Association of Children's Museums. She has extensive experience in leading projects that support museum educators in thinking about the role of museums in children's learning and community engagement.

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Collaborators

Kiera Brant-Birioukov is from Kenhtè:ke (Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, Ontario). She is a Senior Consultant and Co-Founder of Ridge Road Training and Consulting, with expertise in Indigenous thought, educational research, and professional development.

Michael Harcourt has been a social studies teacher and is a lecturer at the University of Wellington, New Zealand.

Tasha Henry is an Inclusive Education teacher and writer of truth and reconciliation curricula.

Joana Joachim is an Assistant Professor at Concordia with expertise in Black feminist art histories and critical museology.

Andrea Milligan is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Wellington and Learning Manager at Experience Wellington.

Jessica Ticktin is a public radio producer of stories about race and reconciliation from the perspectives of children and youth.

Research Assistants

Suad Ahmed is a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Education at York University. Her research focuses on the experiences of Somali children in schools and the emotional and social impacts of anti-Black racism.

E.Y. Zipris is a doctoral candidate and adjunct faculty at Teachers College, Columbia University and former Director of Education at the Museum of the City of New York. Her research focuses on creative technologies and social justice practices in museum contexts.

Acknowledgements

A Note of Gratitude

We would like to thank the museum respondents who took the time to complete the survey. We would also like to thank the collaborators on the project who offered valuable feedback on the survey questions and findings. We were incredibly fortunate to have the expertise of Laurence Richard of Impact Recherche in Montréal, Quebec, Canada, who provided invaluable support throughout the project in survey design, programming, and data analysis. Early drafts of the survey benefited from the input of researchers in survey design at York University's Institute for Social Research. Dr. Helen Yaqing Han executed the report design, and we thank her for this work. Dr. Helen Yaqing Han is a graphic designer, design educator and researcher. We are grateful to Dr. Aaron Richmond for reviewing the accessibility of the report and making recommendations to increase its accessibility for visually disabled readers and for users of screen reading software. Dr. Aaron Richmond is an Accessibility Consultant, and an Independent Researcher in Disability Studies, and Inclusive Education.

This report draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. We are grateful to the agency for their support of this work.

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

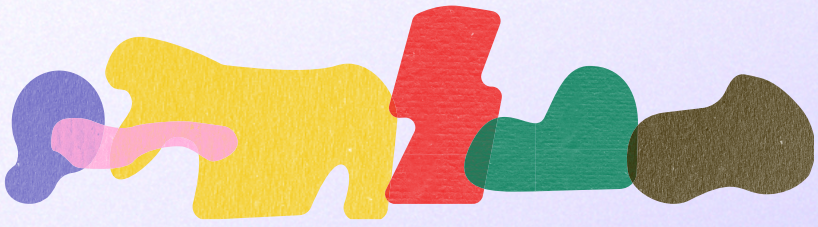
Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

Land Acknowledgment

This report was written in the area known Tkaronto (Toronto), which has been care taken by the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Huron-Wendat. Now home to many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities, the current treaty holders are the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. As a multi-site project, the report was also written on the traditional lands of the Lenape Peoples in the area known as Lenapehoking (New York City).

As researchers and writers of the report, we hold intersecting positions in relationship to the land and ongoing colonial legacies that continue to shape and thwart relationships with First Nations, Inuit, Métis, and Indigenous Peoples. Settler researchers on the project acknowledge our responsibilities to create more respectful relationships with First Nations, Inuit, Métis, and Indigenous Peoples by identifying and critiquing how the institutions in which we work, including museums and universities, continue to be implicated in colonial legacies. In writing the report, we hope to contribute to efforts to track and transform unequal dynamics of power, oppression, and erasure that such legacies perpetuate.



Ethics Approval

This research was approved by York University's Human Participants Review Committee (HPRC), certificate number e2023-330. Participation in the survey was completely voluntary. After clicking on the survey link, respondents were directed to the Informed Consent Form with details about the study, confidentiality, risks and benefits, emotional supports where needed, and the Principal Investigator's information should they have questions. Upon indicating their consent to participate in the study, participants could then access the survey questions.

The Survey

The survey included a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions that were developed in consultation with the Director of Field Studies and Research at the Association of Children's Museums (ACM), researchers of social studies education, childhood studies, disability studies, museology, and Indigenous curriculum studies, and a focus group of museum educators and directors. Survey questions, design, programming, and data analysis was supported by Impact Research/ Recherche, and specifically Laurence Richard. Early discussions about survey design were also supported through consultation with the *Institute for Social Research* at York University.

Methods

Between February-May 2024, participants were recruited via email invitation using ACM's wide network of membership. Since there are fewer ACM museums in Canada, the research team did a wide search of children's museums in Canada to achieve a greater balance in representation across nations. All respondents were compensated with a $50.00 gift card.

Recruitment intentionally excluded Indigenous-led museums in both the US and Canada. Our reasons were twofold: first, we sought to actively resist the proclivity to download obligation onto Indigenous Peoples and Nations to explain or share resources on histories that are the responsibility of settlers to study and learn. Second, the focus of this study is on how non-Indigenous institutions address social issues and diverse histories, including settler colonial histories.

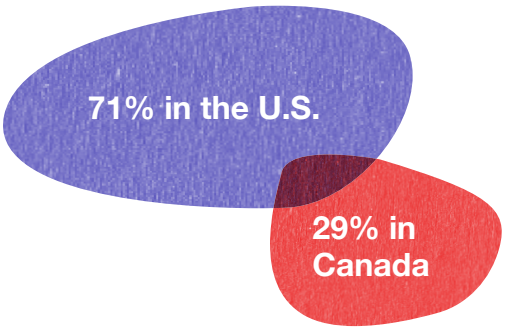
In analyzing the data, statistical significance was determined at the 95% and sometimes 90% level. This means that when we describe significant differences between variables (such as between the US and Canada), there is a 90-95% degree of certainty that the variables in question are different from each other.

A Note on Language

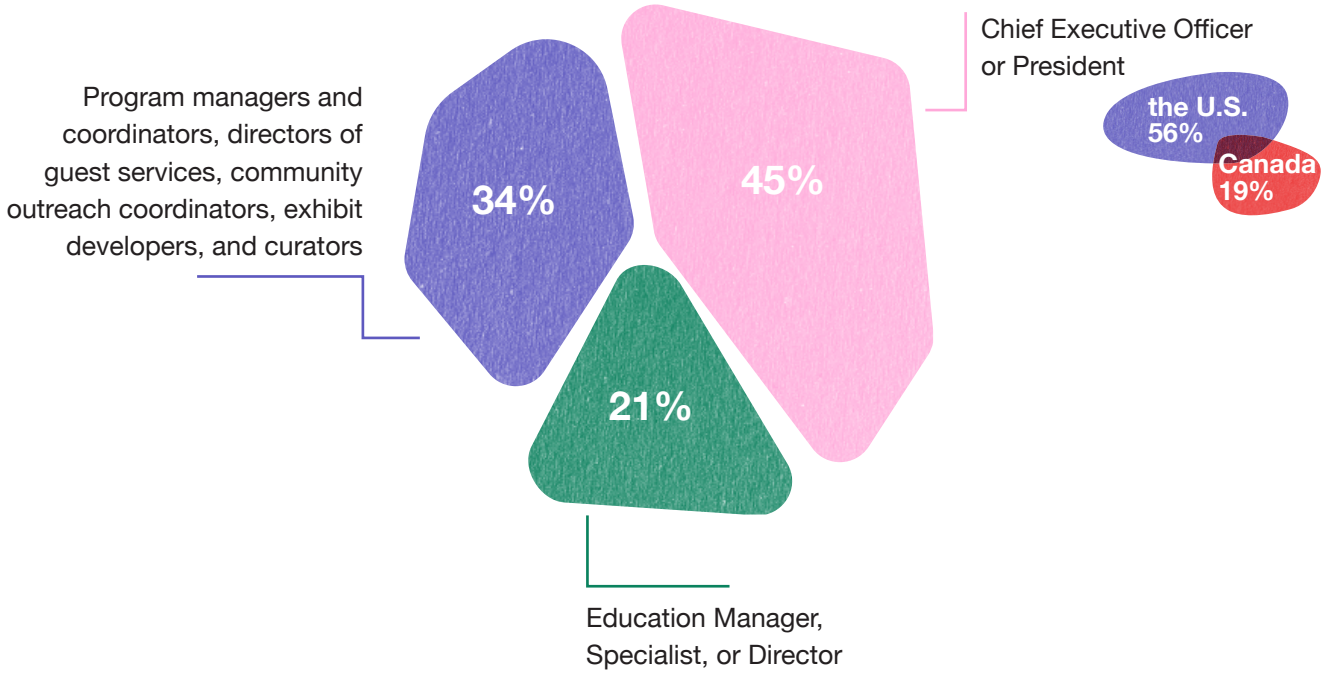
This report cites direct quotes from participants who provided consent for us to do so. We wish to acknowledge that language is a political system of meaning-making that changes over time and that the terms represented in this report are subject to shift and grow as knowledge also shifts and grows. We also acknowledge that different people may use different language to represent the complex histories, experiences, and identities that are represented in the report. In writing the report, we were guided by commitments to equity, diversity, accessibility, and inclusion for all people, including people who are children.

Respondents

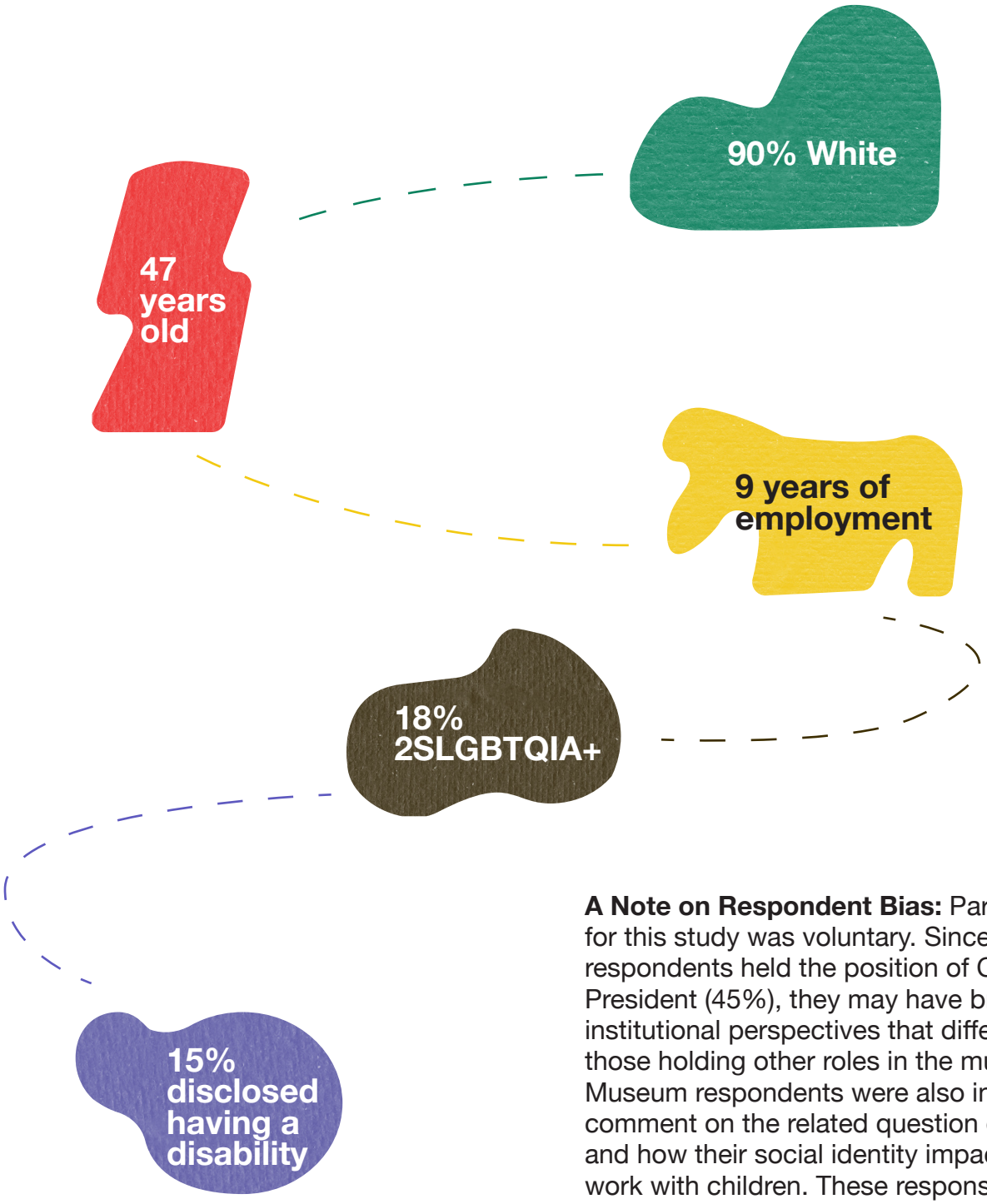
Between February-May 2024, **106 museum staff** working in the United States and Canada responded to the survey. Overall, **71%** of respondents were in **the United States** and **29%** in **Canada**.



Of respondents, 45% held the position of Chief Executive Officer or President, with significantly more US respondents than Canadian respondents holding senior leadership positions (56% vs 19% among Canadian respondents). Additionally, 21% of respondents held positions as Education Manager, Specialist, or Director. Program managers and coordinators, directors of guest services, community outreach coordinators, exhibit developers, and curators comprised approximately 34% of the participant pool .



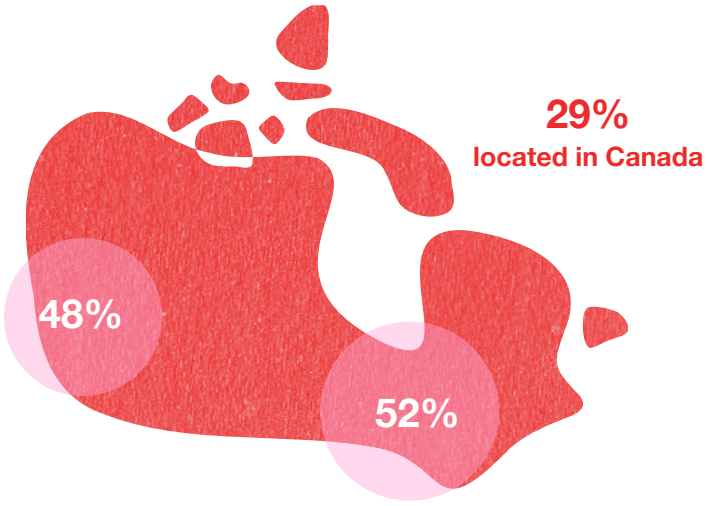
Respondents were racially homogenous, with **90%** identifying as **White**. The mean age of respondents was **47 years old**, and the mean duration of employment was a little over **9 and half years**. In terms of sexuality, **18%** of respondents identified as **2SLGBTQIA+** and significantly more respondents who identified as such had held their position for less than 6 years. Most respondents (85%) also did not identify as a person with a disability.

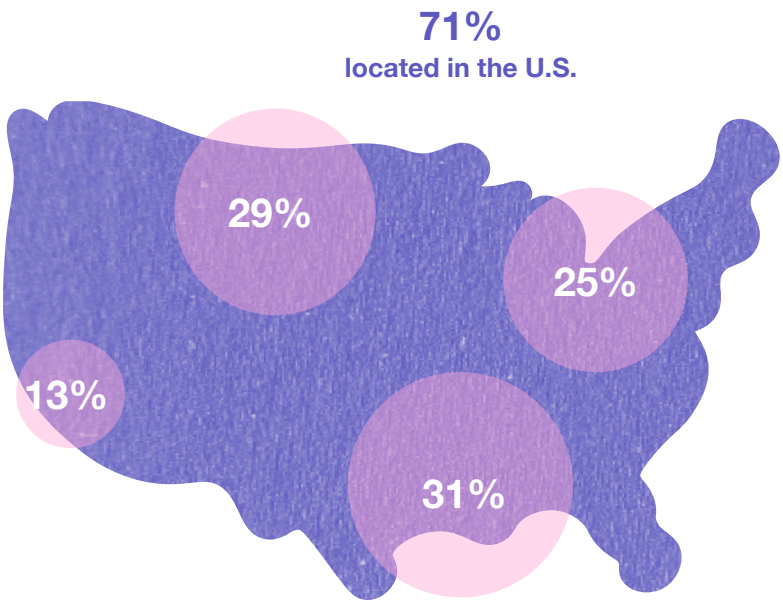


A Note on Respondent Bias: Participation for this study was voluntary. Since many respondents held the position of CEO or President (45%), they may have brought institutional perspectives that differed from those holding other roles in the museum. Museum respondents were also invited to comment on the related question of whether and how their social identity impacts their work with children. These responses are examined further on in the report.

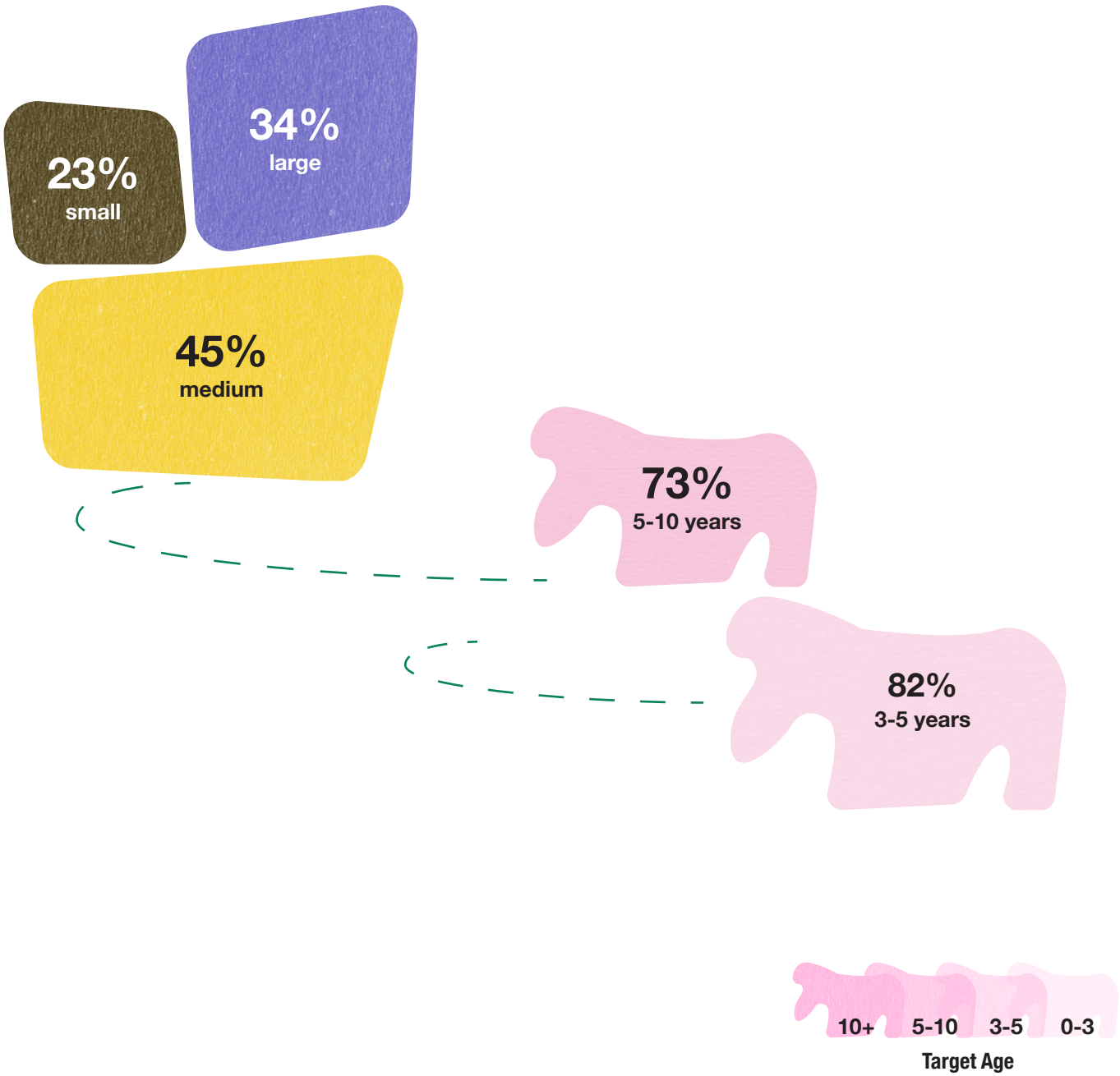
The Museums

Most museum respondents were located in the US (71%) with 29% in Canada. US museums were evenly distributed across the Midwest (29%), Northeast (25%), the South (31%), with fewer in the West (13%). Canadian museums are evenly straddled between the west (48%) and the east (including Ontario and Quebec) (52%).



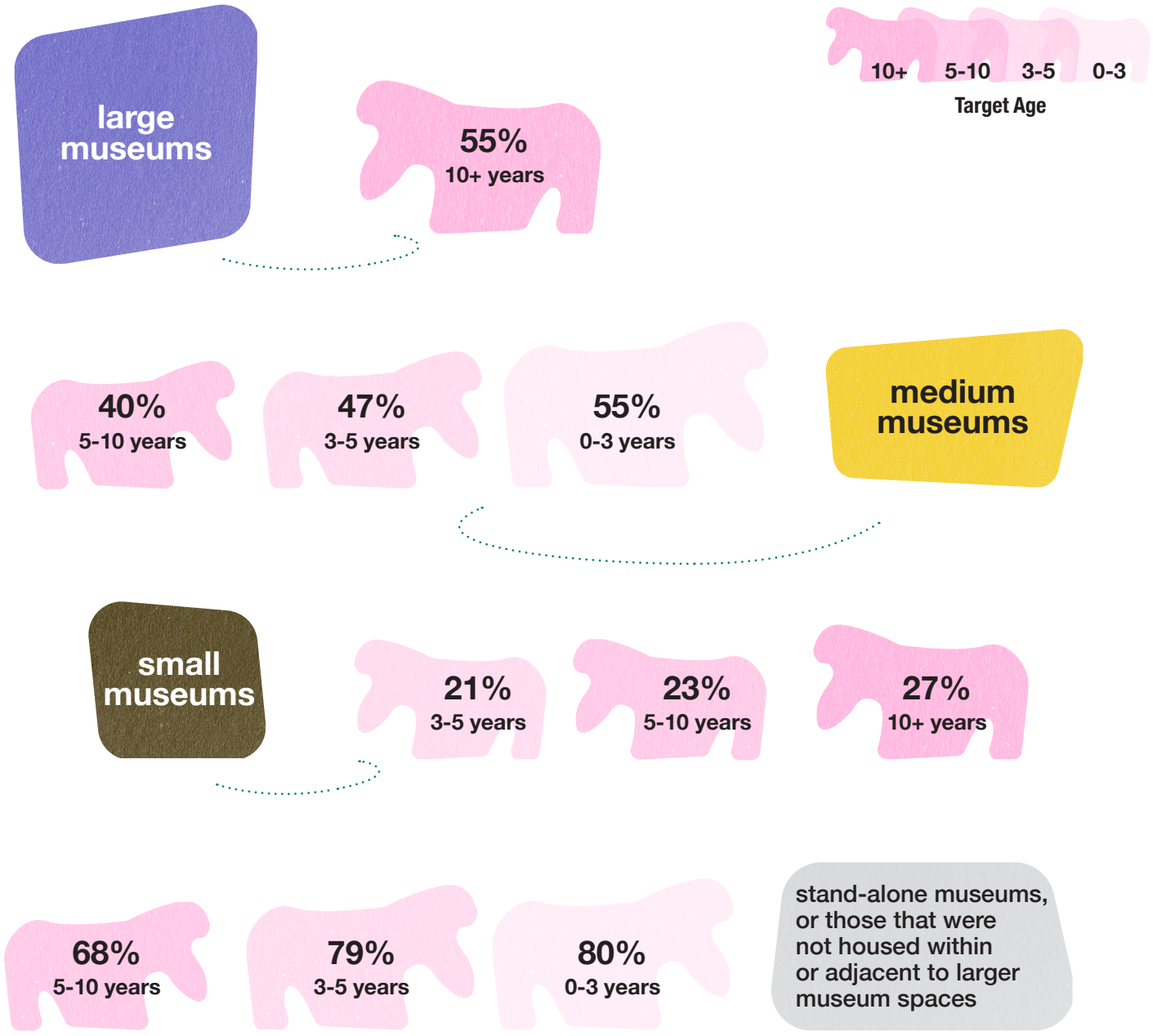


Museums represented in the survey varied in size, including small (23%), medium (45%) and large (34%). Children aged 3-5 years were the primary target audience of most museums represented in the survey (82%), with children aged 5-10 (73%) as a close second. Significantly more Canadian museum respondents worked in a museum that offers children's programming (55%) or in a complex of a larger museum (26%). Most US respondents (92%) worked in a stand-alone children's museum.

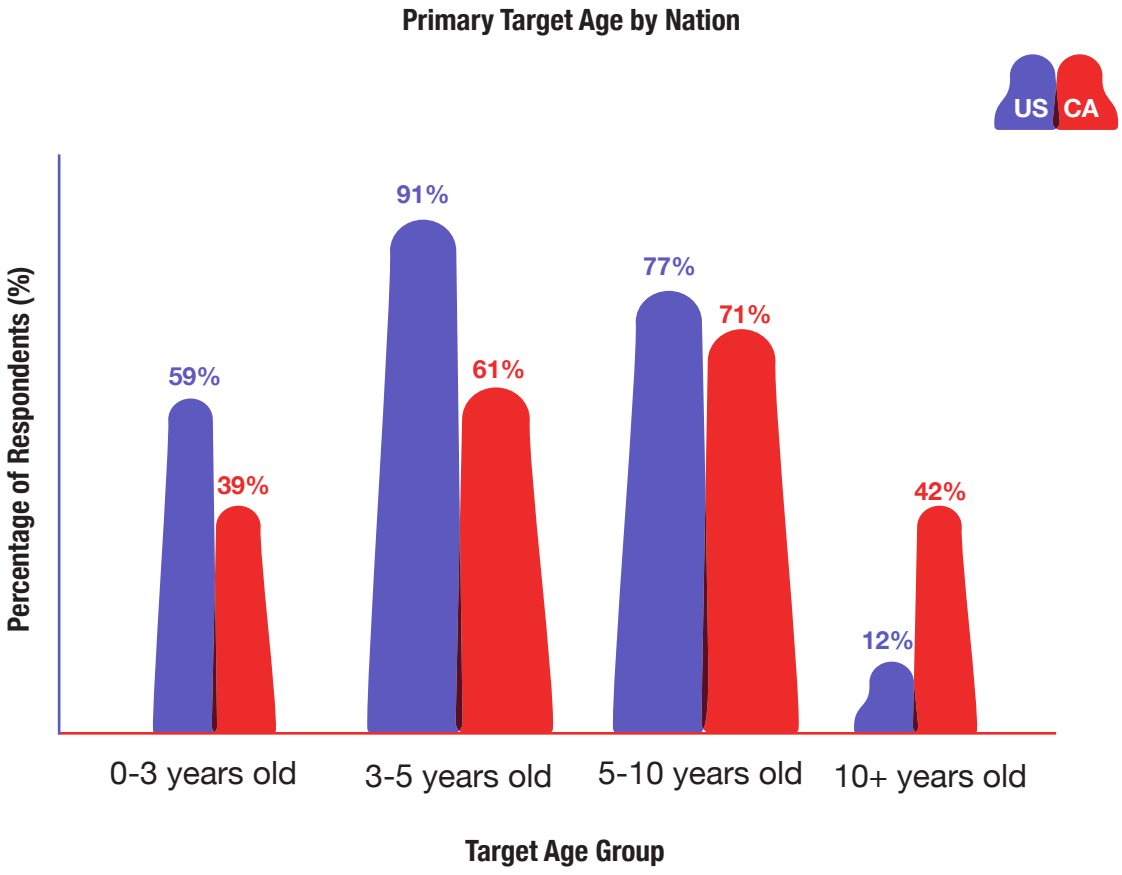


Museum size correlated with primary target age/audience. Large museums were significantly more likely to program for older children of 10+ years (55%) while small and medium-sized museums were more likely to target younger children of 0-10 years (medium: 0-3 years 55%, 3-5 years 47%, and 5-10 years 40%; small: 3-5 years 21% and 5-10 years 23% 10+ years 27%).

Stand-alone museums, or those that were not housed within or adjacent to larger museum spaces, were also more likely to program for younger children of 0-3 years (80%), 3-5 years (79%,) and 5-10 years (68%). Note that respondents could select multiple age-groups to represent their institution's target audiences.

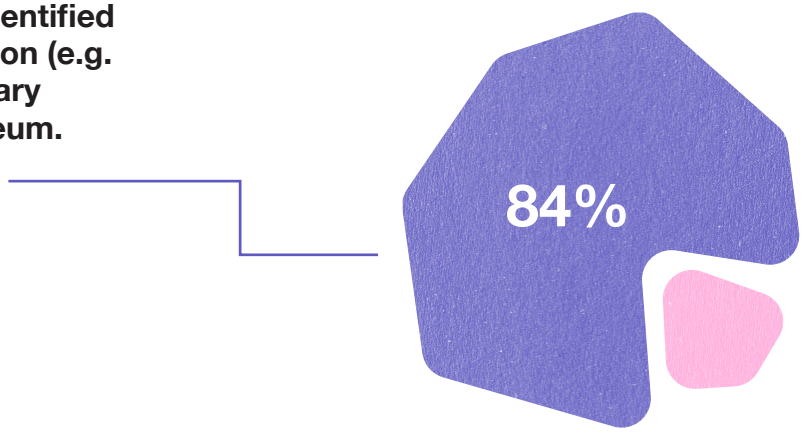


Primary target age/audience varied by nation. Significantly more US respondents reported that their institutions geared programming toward younger children (aged 0-10 years old). Specifically, US museums were significantly more likely than Canadian museums to target the youngest children of 0-3 years old (59% vs 39%) and 3-5 years old (91% vs 61%). US and Canadian museums served middle aged children of 5-10 years somewhat equally (77% and 71%). However, significantly more Canadian respondents than US respondents reported targeting older children (aged 10+) as their primary audience (42% vs 12 %).

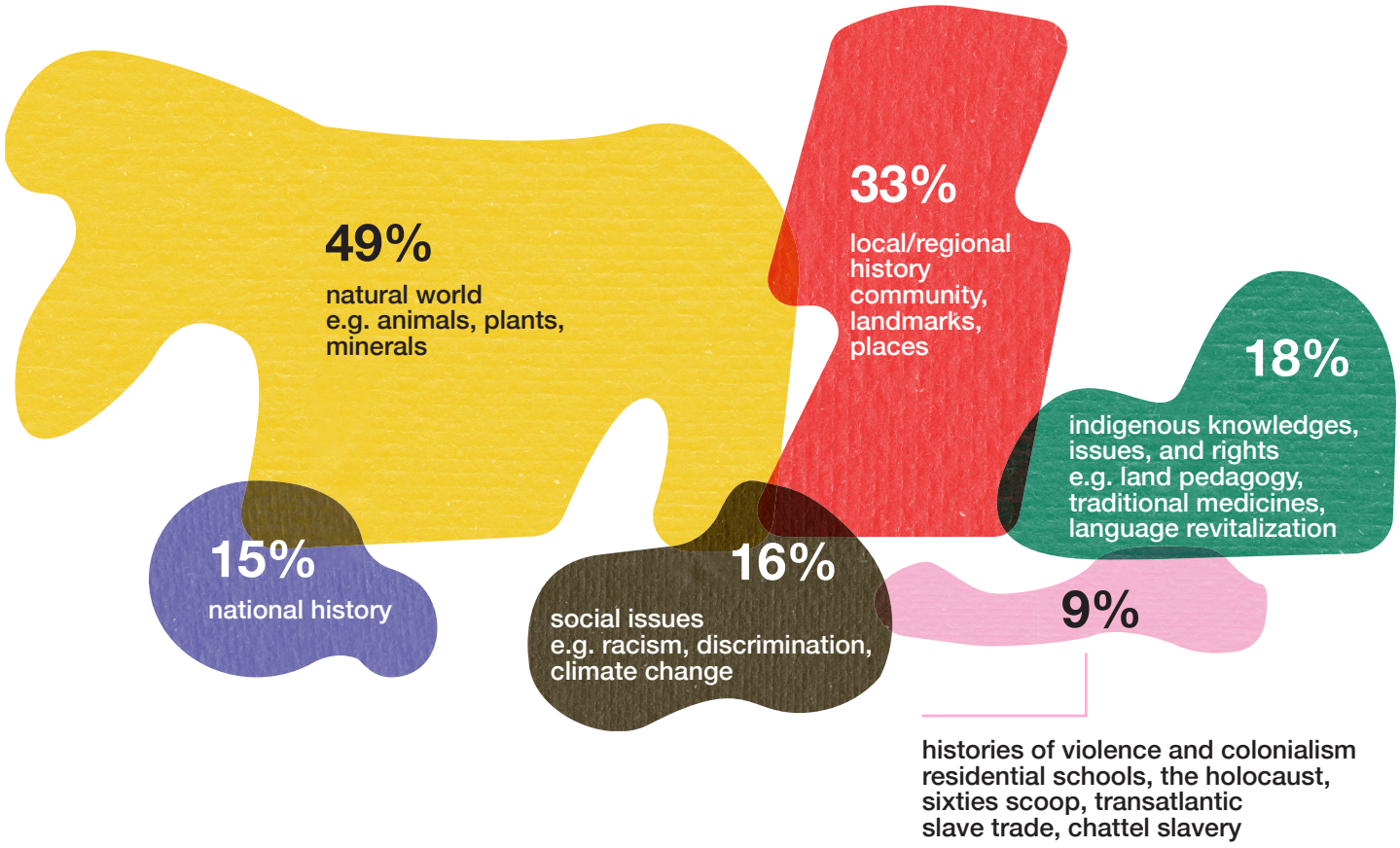


Programming

Respondents most frequently identified self-expression and/or exploration (e.g. play, manipulatives) as the primary topic programmed at their museum.



The topic of self-expression was followed by the natural world and social-historical topics. These foci mirrored progressive pedagogies and developmental scaffolds that begin with children's experiences of self and then move to the larger world comprised of plants and animals including a child's immediate surroundings and/or local community.



Socio-historical issues and events were more frequently identified as secondary programming topics, and were more evenly distributed across a range of areas:

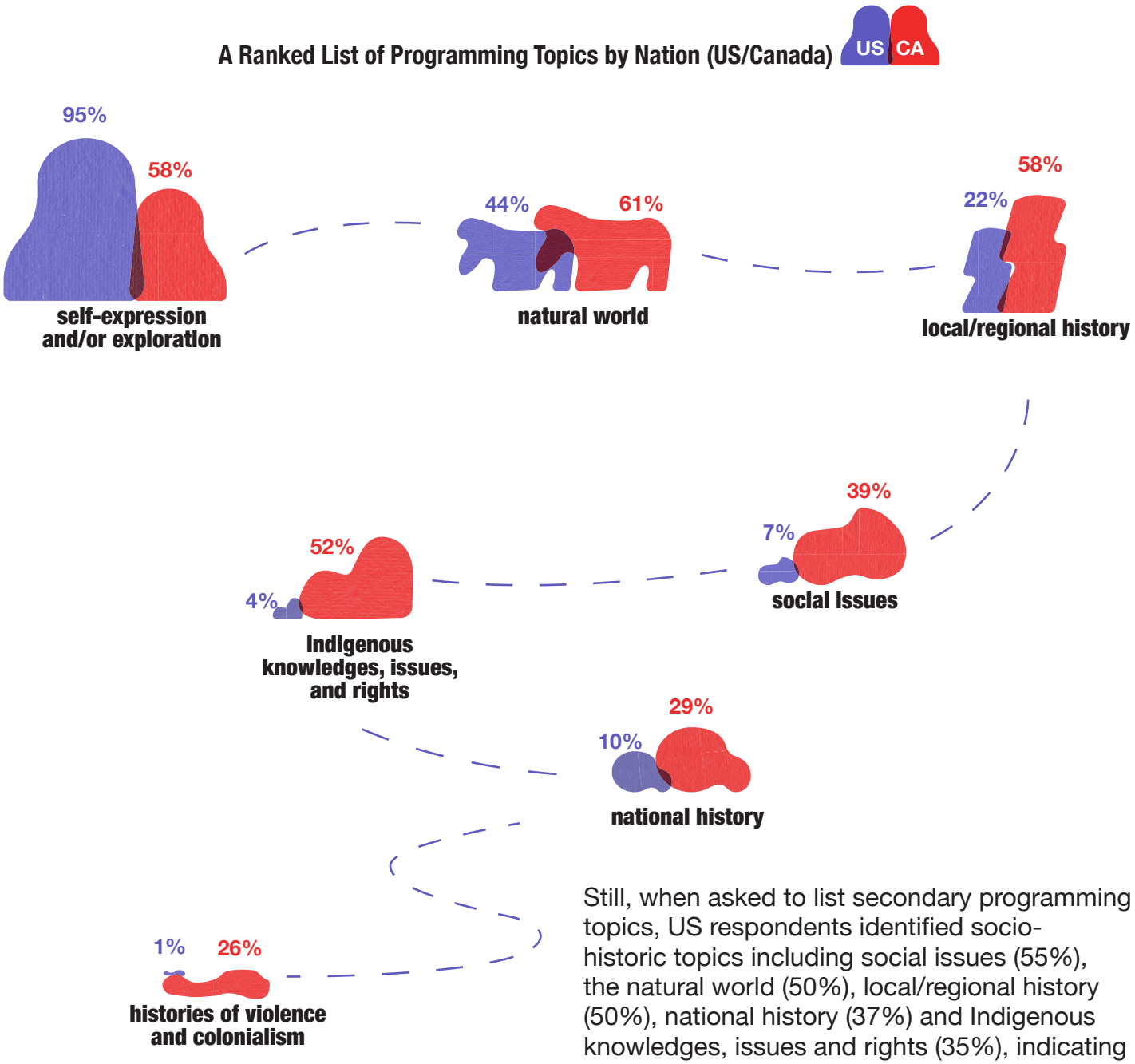
The topic of historical violence and colonialism was marginal in both Canadian and US programming. Of respondents, 9% named histories of violence and colonialism as a primary programming topic, and 18% named it as a secondary programming topic. The marginal status of violent and colonial history was more pronounced in US responses. Only 1% of US respondents named historical violence and colonialism as a primary programming topic (compared with 26% of Canadian respondents), and 3% of US respondents named histories of violence and colonialism as a secondary programming topic (compared with 50% of Canadian respondents).

Multiple factors shaped museum programming. Museum respondents self-reported that programming was most often shaped by museum mission statements, strategic priorities and learning outcomes (86%), children's development (76%), and museum educators and staff (69%).

Other factors included:

- feedback from children and families (58%)
- community context/participation (44%)
- museum directors and administration (43%)
- commitments to Indigenous communities (28%)
- school board/district curriculum (26%)
- philanthropist donors/donations (8%)
- board of trustees/governors (7%)
- virtual/hybrid formats vs in-person (3%)

Programming topics varied by nation. US respondents were significantly more likely than Canadian respondents to name self-expression and/or exploration as a primary programming topic, whereas significantly more Canadian respondents than US respondents named socio-historical topics as primary. This distinction may be confounded by the fact that significantly more Canadian museums programmed for older children and significantly more US museums geared programming toward younger children. The graph below shows a ranked list of programming topics by country (U.S. and Canada):

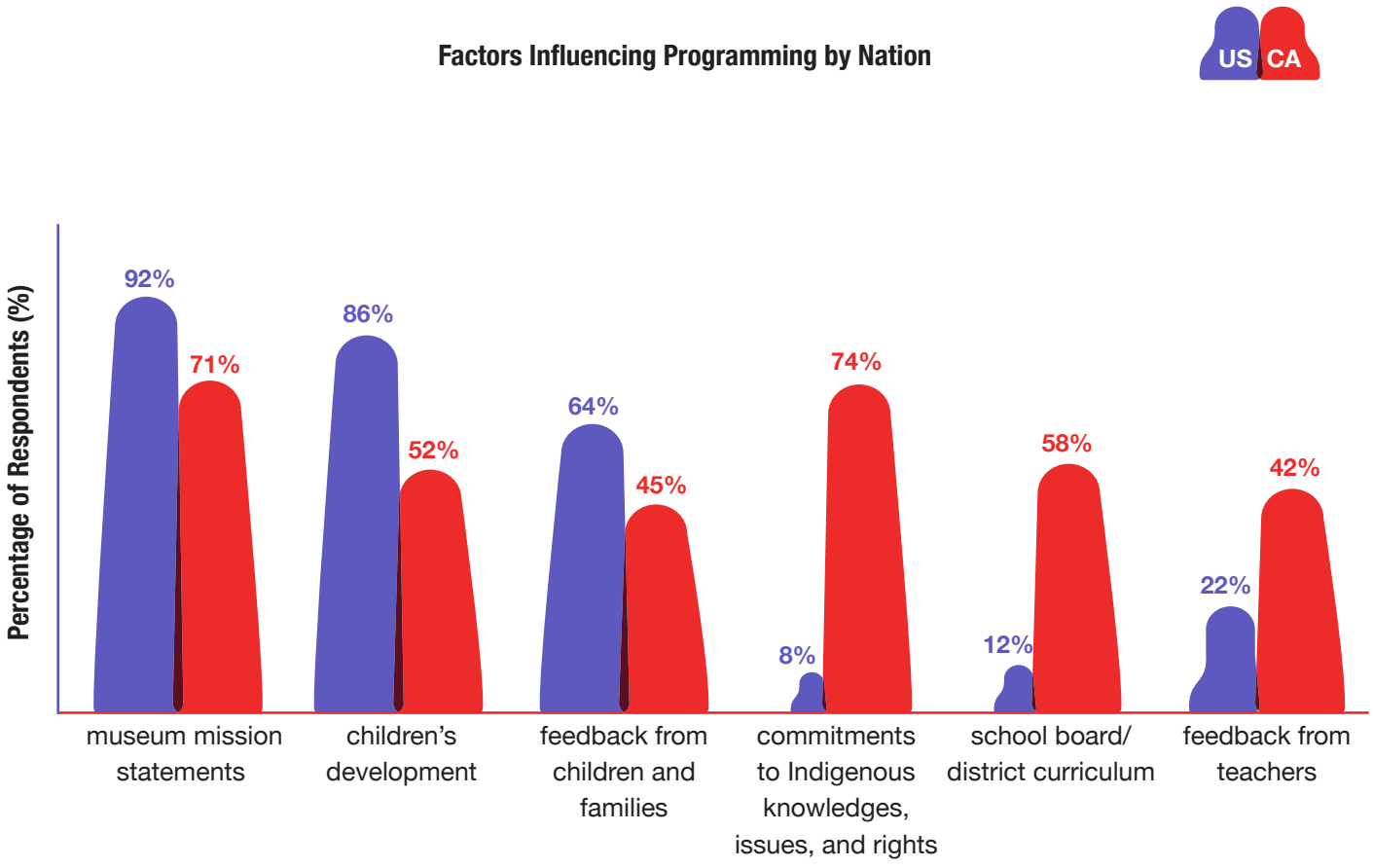


Still, when asked to list secondary programming topics, US respondents identified socio-historic topics including social issues (55%), the natural world (50%), local/regional history (50%), national history (37%) and Indigenous knowledges, issues and rights (35%), indicating that socio-historic topics were represented within US museums, although with somewhat less emphasis than Canadian museums.

Factors influencing programming varied by nation. Significantly more US respondents than Canadian respondents cited museum mission statements (92% vs 71%), children's development (86% vs 52%) and feedback from children and families (64% vs 45%) as primary factors influencing programming. Significantly more Canadian respondents identified commitments to Indigenous knowledges, issues, and rights (74% vs 8%), school board/ district curriculum (58% vs 12%) and feedback from teachers (42% vs 22%) as primary factors.

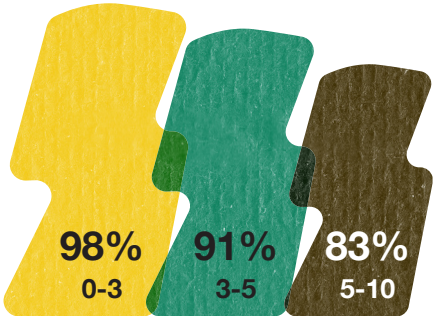
Still, 59% of US respondents also cited teacher feedback as a secondary factor. Only 18% identified Indigenous knowledges, issues, and rights as a secondary factor. Significantly more US than Canadian respondents mentioned a Board of Trustees/Governors (34% vs 13%) and Philanthropist donors/donations (28% vs 10%) as secondary factors. The graph below illustrates the factors influencing programming, categorized by country:

Factors Influencing Programming by Nation

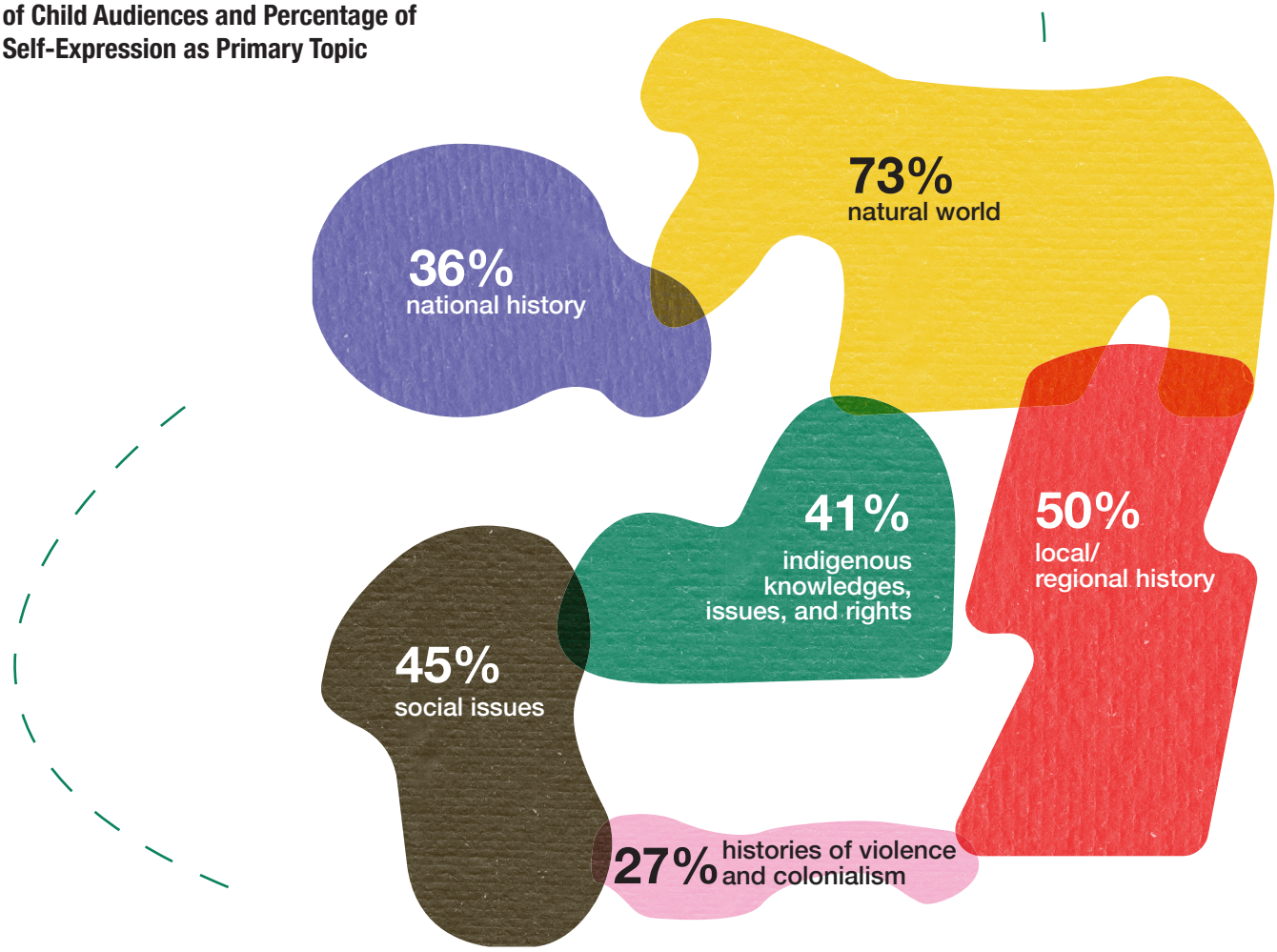


Curriculum and school partnerships mattered. Of museum respondents overall, 69% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that they "work closely with school curriculum, teachers, and staff in planning learning experiences."

Age of child audiences was linked to programming. Museums that programmed for younger audiences (0-10 years) were significantly more likely to focus on the topic of self-expression (98%, 0-3 years; 91%, 3-5 years; 83%, 5-10 years). Museums that targeted older audiences (10+) were more likely to foreground broader topics, including the natural world (73%), local/regional history (50%), social issues (45%), Indigenous knowledges, issues, and rights (41%), national history (36%), and histories of violence and colonialism (27%). Museums targeting younger audiences most often addressed local/regional history as a secondary topic (55%, 0-3 years; 49%, 3-5 years; 35%, 5-10 years).

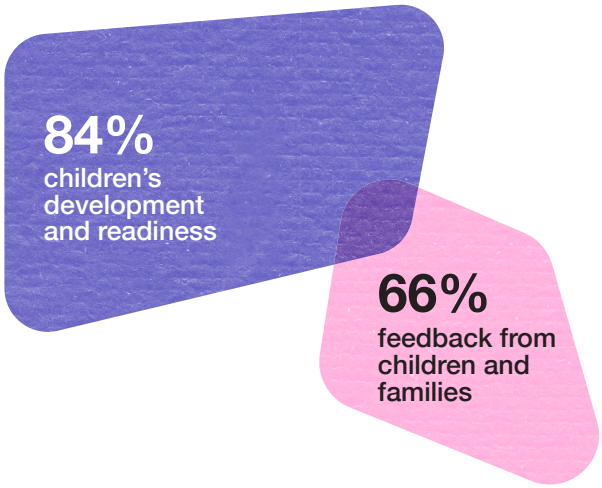


Age of Child Audiences and Percentage of Self-Expression as Primary Topic



Primary Topics for Children 10+

When museums targeted younger children, programming was more often influenced by children's development and readiness (84%, 0-3 years; 84%, 3-5 years) and feedback from children and families (66%, 0-3 years; 66%, 3-5 years; 53%, 5-10 years). Programming in museums targeting older children was more often affected by commitments to Indigenous knowledges, issues, and rights (55%) and school board/district curriculum (45%).

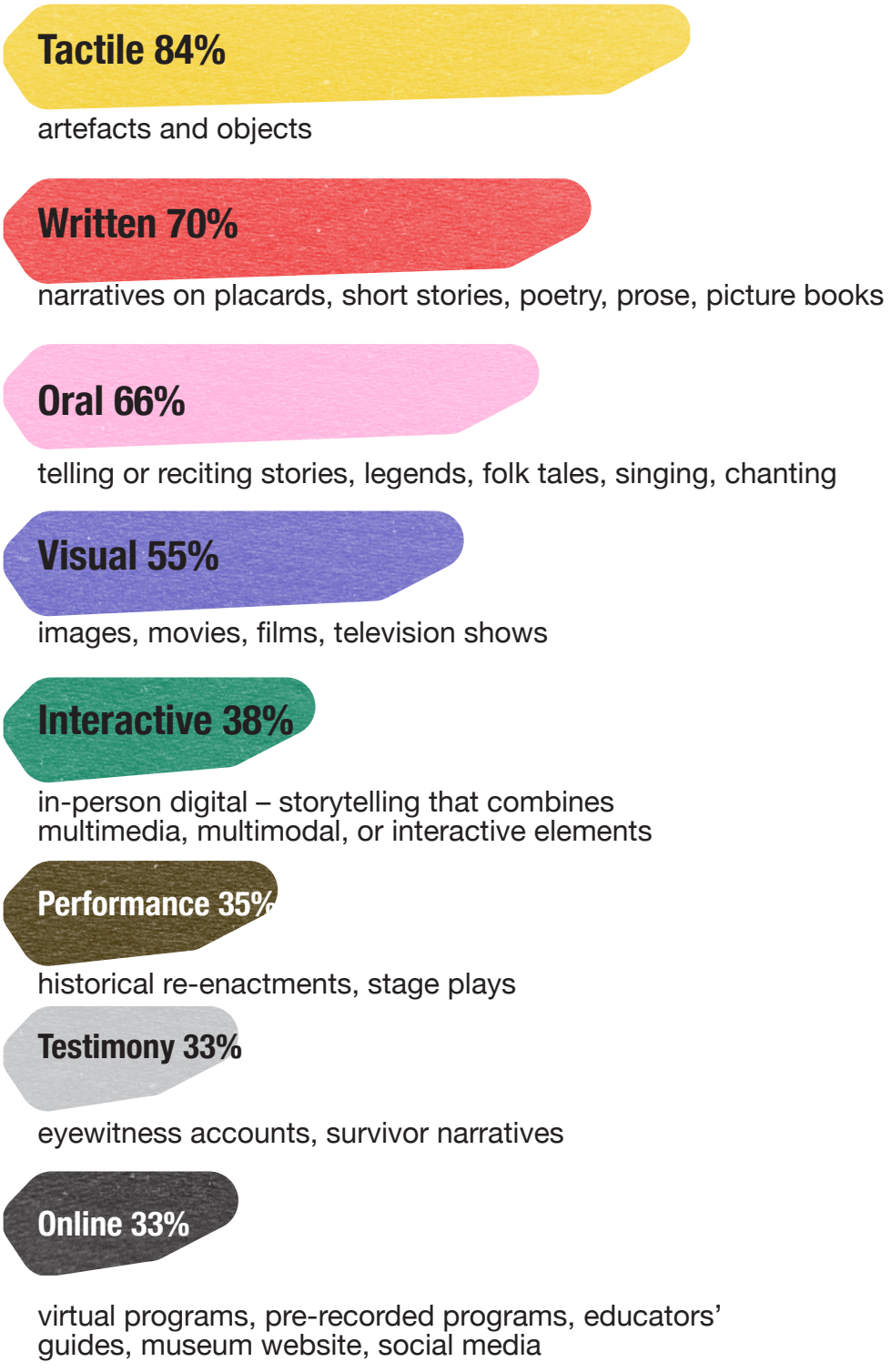


Programming Influences by Target Age Group of 0-3 years and 3-5 years

Programming Influences by Target Older Children

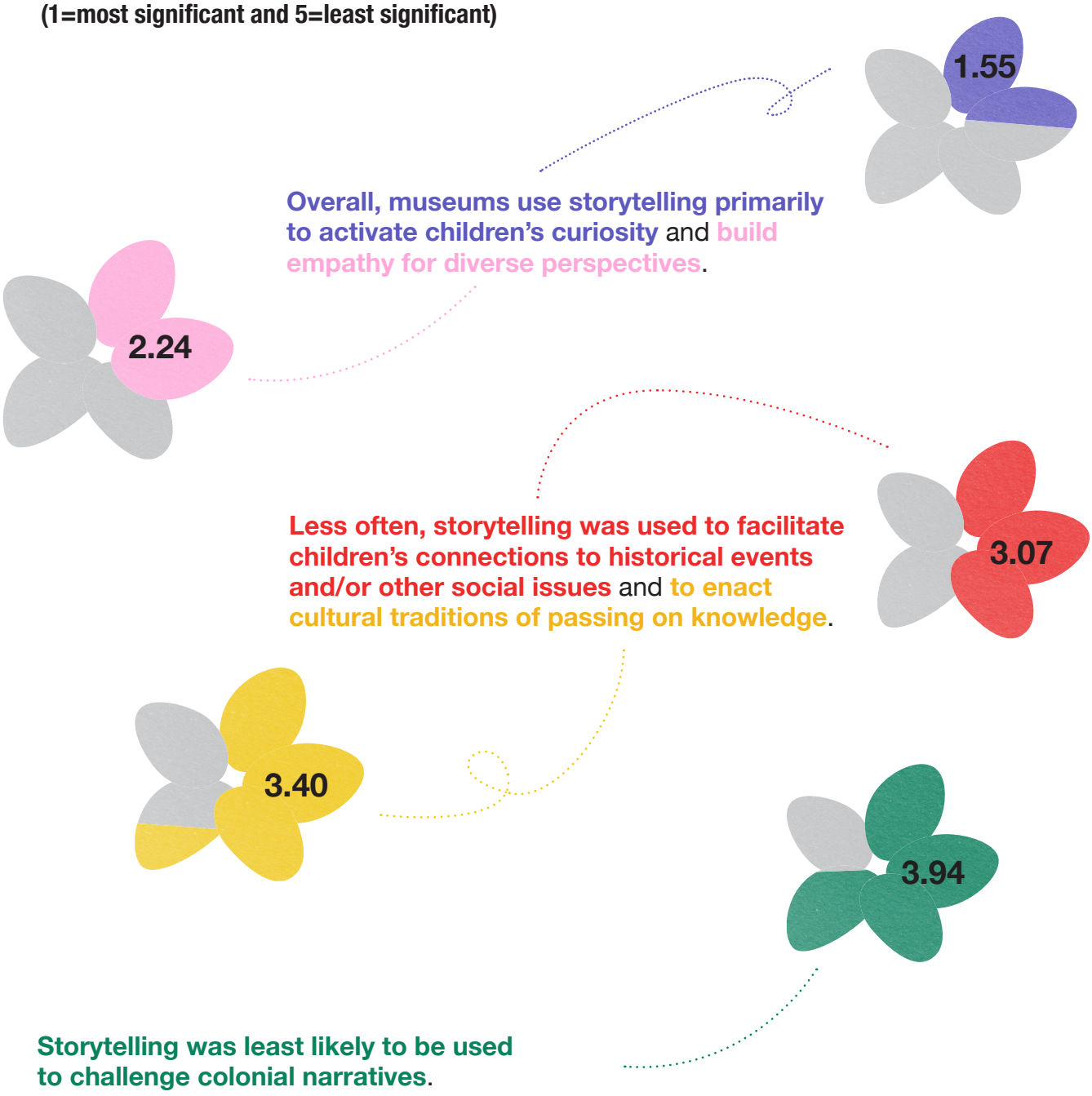
Storytelling Practices

Museum respondents reported using a variety of storytelling practices.
Among them are included:



The data below shows the purposes of storytelling practices in children's museums, based on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = most significant, 5 = least significant).

= 5-Point Likert Scale
(1=most significant and 5=least significant)



Storytelling was least likely to be used to challenge colonial narratives.

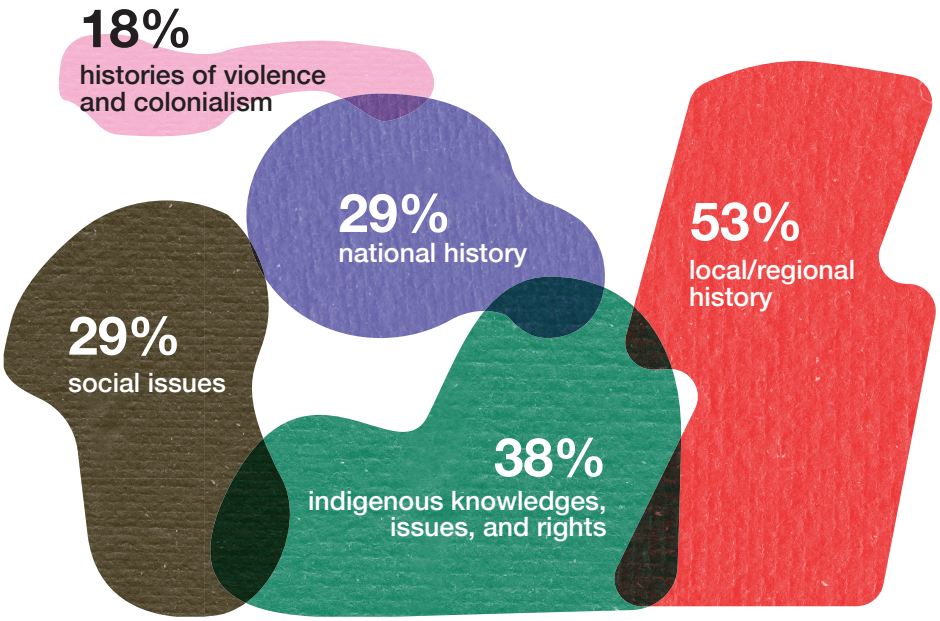
This was especially the case for museums that programmed for younger audiences (0-3, 4.31/5 and 3-5 years, 4.02/5).

Storytelling practices varied by nation. Canadian respondents were more likely than US respondents to report using testimony (52% vs 26%) and visual stories (76% vs 47%).

Purposes of storytelling varied by nation and US regions. Canadian respondents were more likely than US respondents to use stories for the purpose of challenging colonial narratives while US respondents were more likely to use storytelling to enact cultural traditions of teaching and passing on knowledge. Significantly fewer US museums in the South (compared to the mid-West and West) used storytelling to challenge colonial narratives.

Storytelling practices were tied to the purpose/aims of storytelling. Testimony, more than written, tactile engagements, and digital stories, was used for the purpose of activating children's curiosity. As well, testimony, more than performance, was used to build empathy for diverse perspectives.

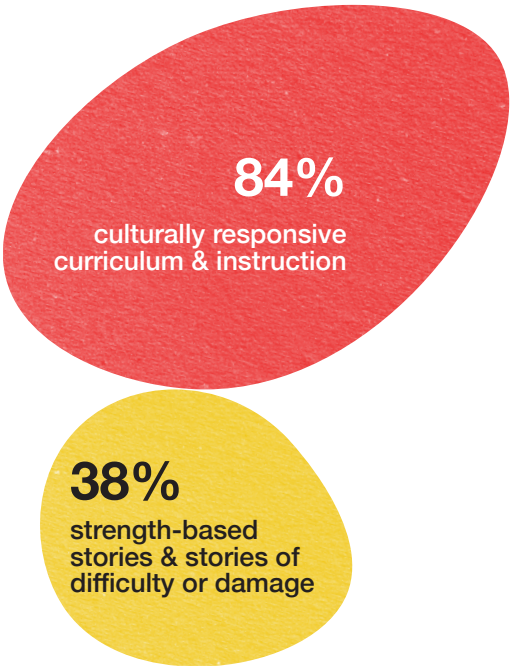
Testimonial practices were linked to socio-historic programming topics. Below is a graph showing the topics most commonly addressed by museums using testimony in their programming:



Topics Addressed by Museums Using Testimony

Testimonial practices were also linked to inclusive strategies. For instance, museums using testimonial practices were also more likely to integrate culturally responsive curriculum and instruction as an inclusive strategy and to report achieving a balance of strength-based stories and stories of difficulty or damage.

Testimony was also linked to other storytelling forms used within museums. For instance, museums using testimony were also more likely to use tactile engagements with artefacts (97%), oral (85%), and visual storytelling practices (74%).



Storytelling: Examples and Themes

Qualitative responses described a range of storytelling practices, including examples of how museums used storytelling to represent a diversity of social and historical events and experiences. This suggests that aims to activate curiosity and promote empathy through storytelling are also oriented toward social-historical topics and issues. In open-ended questions, museum respondents shared examples of inviting outside storytellers or having staff share stories directly with young children (n=50), regular or special programming such as musical, dance, or theatre performances (n=19), conducting "read alouds" of selected texts and books (n=17), and drawing from stories that were built into museum exhibits (n=16).

Theme 1: Direct Storytelling

The most common form of storytelling included those directly told to children by either in-house staff members or invited guests with specific backgrounds or experiences. Firsthand storytelling or testimonies where guests were invited into museum settings (n=25) were entirely conducted by individuals from minoritized, non-dominant identities, such as those who are Black/African American, immigrants, senior citizens, LGBTQ, or those from Indigenous groups or with disabilities. Examples included, "We have had Alaskan Native elders attend Super Saturday programming (two-hour program held one time) and share stories while teaching basket weaving" or "the Indigenous Motherhood tour facilitated by individuals who spoke from lived community experience." Storytellers were often from "equity-deserving communities [who] share stories that build empathy and empower listeners. For example, queer storytellers tell original stories from a 2SLGBTQIA+ perspective for visiting families." Another reported, "During December we dedicated a week to Kwanzaa, a week to Hanukkah, and a week to Christmas. Each week we welcomed community members who celebrate these traditions into the museum to tell stories, sing songs, play games and eat food associated with each holiday."

The second most common example of storytelling (n= 21) were those shared by staff members or professional storytellers. Many in this category told stories on topics of kindness, character-building, science, or folktales, and often accentuated their stories with art activities, enactments, or by having children create their own stories. One respondent shared, "We have had a professional storyteller visit the museum and she does well at including the children in the story and applying the issues in the story to today's world." Another example was, "Sharing indigenous oral stories and having groups of students read the story and then re-enact it through a short skit to pass on the story to their peers."

Theme 2: Special Programming

Museums also highlighted storytelling during special programs, such as festivals, puppet shows, theatre performances, or historical reenactments. Many of the festivals were cultural celebrations where museums sought to share music, food, or dances from different countries or communities of interest. For example, “We’ve done music & storytime related to cultural exhibits about China, Japan & South Korea, storytimes with books about Juneteenth, and cultural events celebrating Pride Month, Nowruz, Children’s Day, Diwali, Dia de Los Muertos and more.” Programming often followed local or national holidays such as this museum who shared, “As part of our Pride Month festivities, we led a storytelling series about the history of Pride and how different families celebrate Pride today. We had a range of hands-on making activities that went alongside the story time and other programming.”

Other special programs emerged from collaborations with local children’s theatre or youth groups. These examples covered topics such as life skills, kindness, inclusion, local histories and traditions, or climate change. For example, “We welcomed our local organization of young adults working on life skills to come put on a play of a custom-written story of the three little pigs. They helped rewrite the classic story, put on the show, and added components of audience interaction.”

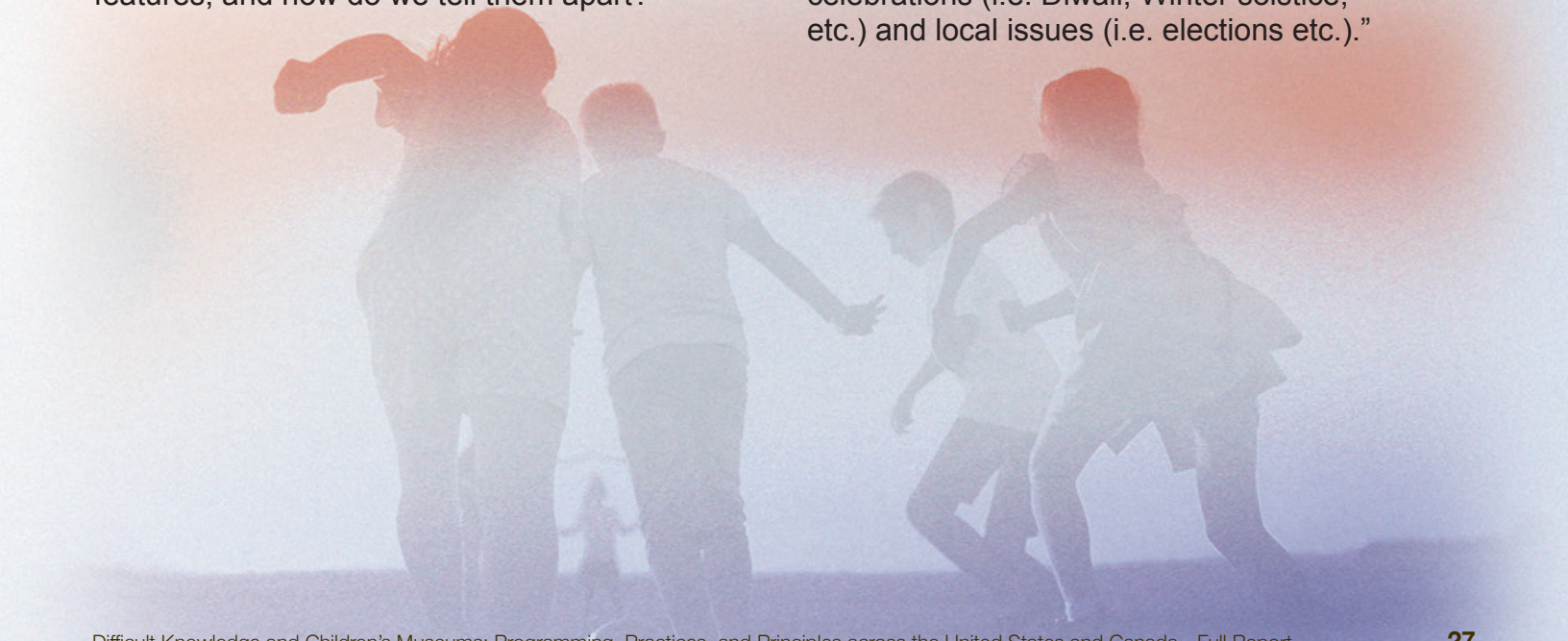
Although few, some museums held historical reenactments with professional actors presenting Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have A Dream” speech, or a costumed actor portraying the Governor of Port-Royal.

Theme 3: "Read Alouds"

Museums also shared that they conducted read alouds of children's literature. Many of these were regular events with books read by staff, or in one case, a children's book author who shared their own work. One museum read books several times a week and based topics on cultural holidays or world events, while others read books once a week or even daily. One museum shared, "At 1:30 every day, we have 'Stop, Drop, and Read.' Every single person who is on the floor at the Museum (even if you work in the office and are just passing through) stops what they are doing and picks up a book from whatever area they are in and starts reading aloud." Other read alouds were built into programs such as, "We lead a 'Story Lounge' for MLK Day and do read alouds of empowering books that feature characters of color," or "Science Storytime [which involved] reading a picture book with a science theme to a group of children." A more specific example was, "We offer an educational outreach program entitled Fur, Feathers, or Scales. We begin by reading the book 'Animals Should Definitely Not Wear Clothing' by Judi and Ron Barrett. The essential question for this program asks, 'Do mammals, birds, and retiles share similar physical features, and how do we tell them apart?'"

Theme 4: Curation

Another form of storytelling came through the curation and design of museum exhibits, as opposed to gatherings or special programs. For example, one respondent shared, "We tell the story of the shores of Lake Superior through immersive environments, representation of animals, and graphics with text," or "One example is through our *Life on the Erie Canal* stories. This is an exhibit that when the visitors open the packet boat doors that it tells stories from a variety of different people and what their experiences were." Some museums incorporated videotaped stories into a "story kiosk" such as in an exhibit called *Behind Racism* where families tell their stories and experiences as "new Canadians." Other sites conducted museum tours where stories were told, designed a *Hall of Mysteries* where children solve mysteries, or for example, created a "Nursery Exhibit [that] features a lullaby station that has 6 different lullabies sung in different languages. These were created by a group of New American Women and Children in Erie County." Another museum highlighted their "*In Our Street Where You Live* exhibit (which looks like a mini town) we have a Community Park which is ever-evolving and changes based on current cultural celebrations (i.e. Diwali, Winter solstice, etc.) and local issues (i.e. elections etc.)."

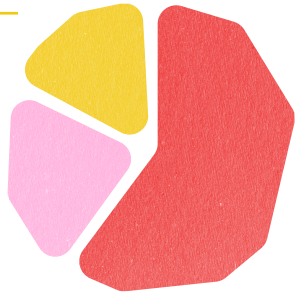


Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion (DEAI)

The following data outlines the prevalence and development status of institutional DEAI (diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion) statements among museum respondents, with differences between Canadian and US respondents noted.

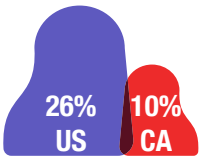
18% of respondents indicated that their museum did not have a DEAI statement or that they weren't sure if they had one.

22% of respondents reported one in development.



60% of all museum respondents, 60% reported having an institutional statement on Diversity, Equity, Accessibility.

US museums were more likely than Canadian museums to have a statement in development.

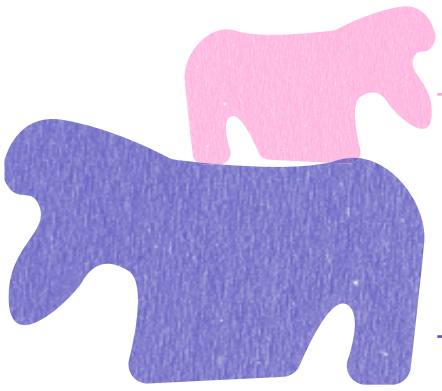


Since the US Presidential election of 2024, it is likely that these policies will come under scrutiny and even erasure, creating further obstacles to equity work.

Museum size was correlated to the status of DEAI statements. Large museums were more likely to have a DEAI statement than small museums (71%), and small museums were less likely than large and medium museums to have a DEAI statement (30%).

Age of target audiences was linked to museum DEAI statements. Museums targeting younger children (24%, 0-3 years; 24%, 3-5 years; 21%, 5-10 years) were more likely to have a DEAI statement in development than museums targeting older children. The graph below illustrates the distribution of museum DEAI statements based on the age of their target audiences:

21-24% of all museums targeting younger children (0-10 years) have a DEAI statement in development.

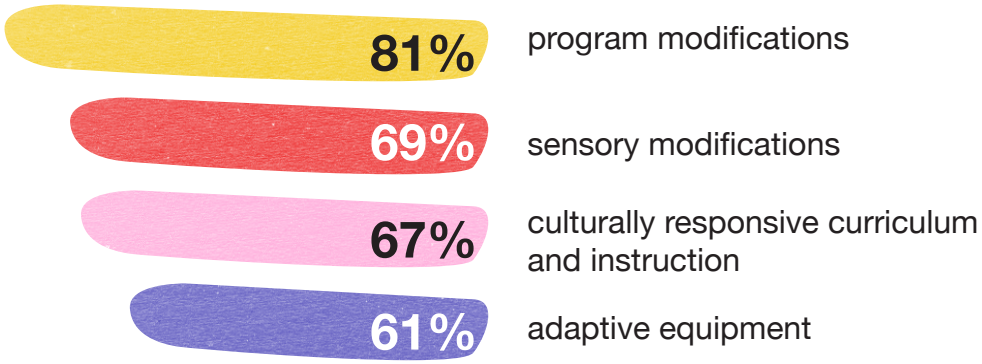


70% of all museums targeting older children (10+ years) had a DEAI statement.

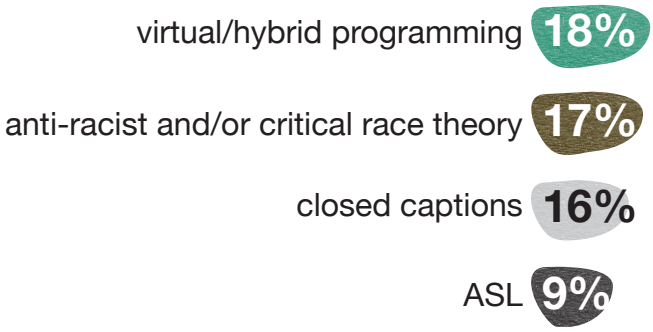
DEAI statements did not affect programming topics. Museums with DEAI statements were as likely as those without statements to gear programing primarily toward the development of children's self-expression and exploration through play and manipulatives.

Inclusive Strategies

Most museums surveyed used program modifications, sensory modifications, culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, and adaptive equipment. Least utilized strategies included virtual/ hybrid programming, anti-racist and/or critical race theory, closed captions, and ASL.

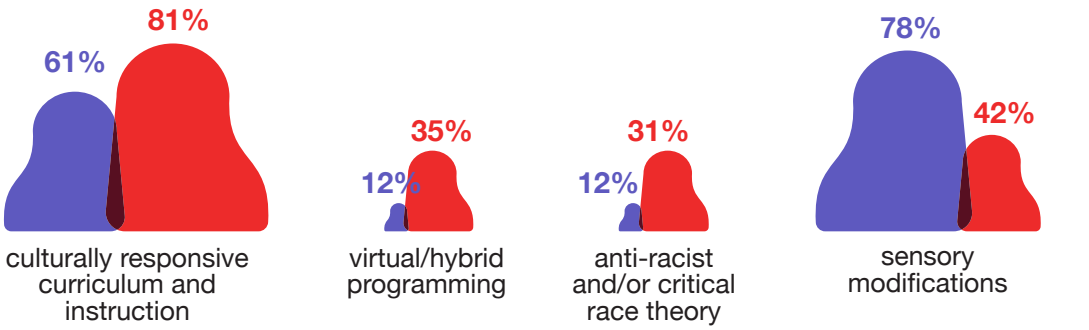


Most Used Inclusive Strategies among Surveyed Museum



Least Utilized Strategies among Surveyed Museum

Inclusive strategies varied by nation. Significantly more Canadian than US respondents incorporated culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, virtual/hybrid programming and anti-racist and/or critical race theory. Significantly more US museums than Canadian museums included sensory modifications.

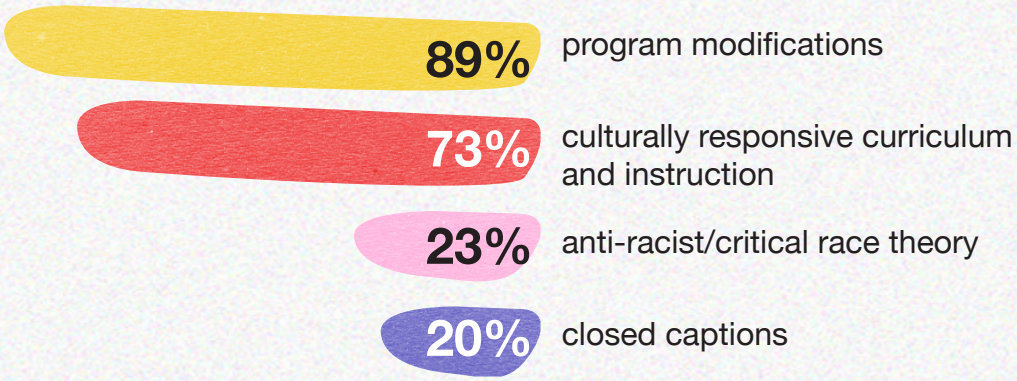


Comparison of Inclusive Strategies in US and Canadian Museums

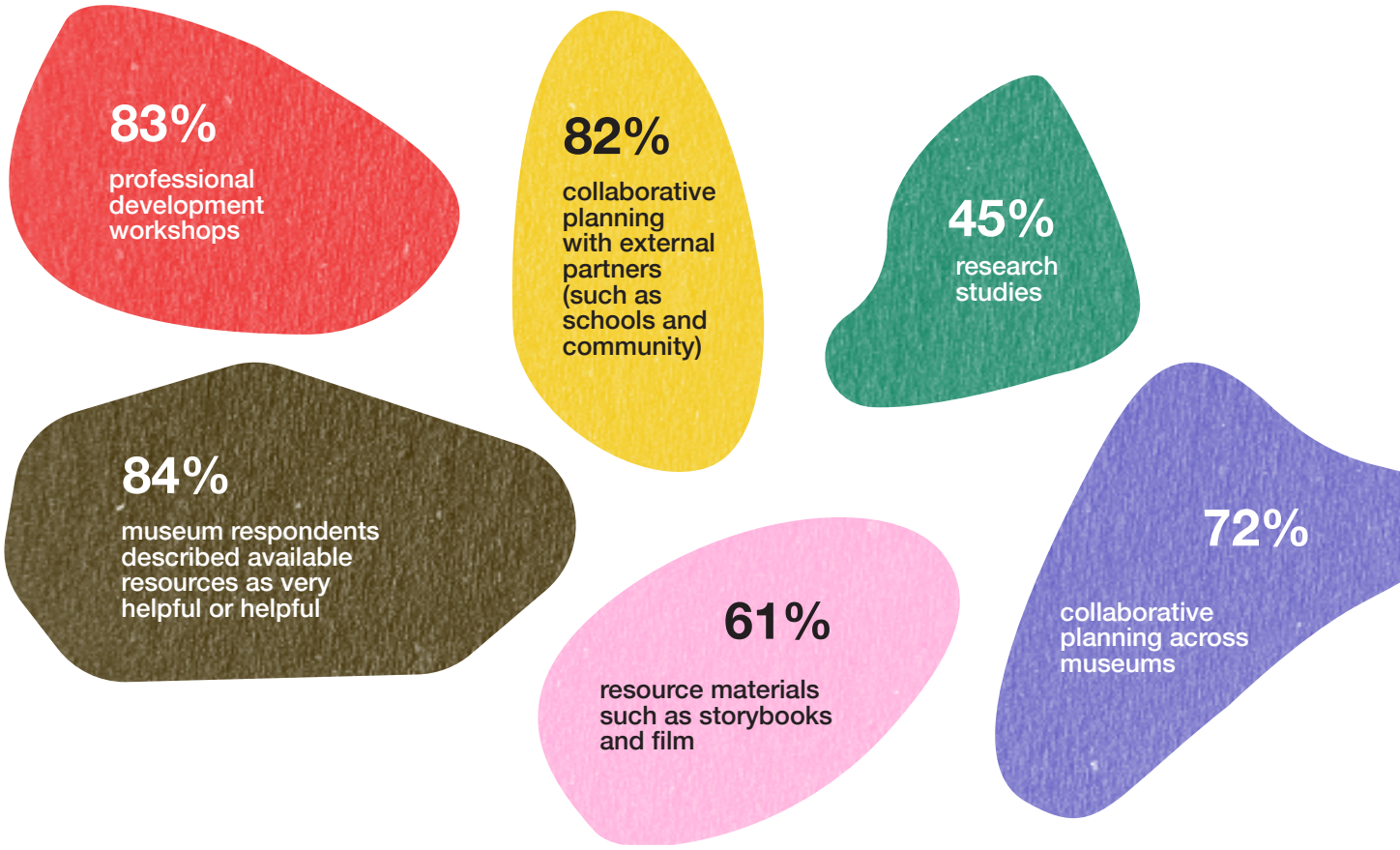
Critical race theory and culturally responsive curriculum and instruction were most often used to represent socio-historic programming topics (such as local/regional history, Indigenous knowledges, issues, and rights, social issues such as racism and discrimination).

Critical race theory and culturally responsive curriculum and instruction were most often used in museums that also identified their commitments to Indigenous communities as a factor shaping programming.

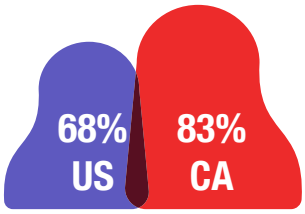
DEAI statements were correlated to the integration of inclusive strategies. Museums with a DEAI statement were significantly more likely than those without or in development to use the following inclusive strategies:



Museum respondents had access to multiple resources in support of DEAI work with children, including:



Most museum respondents (84%) described available resources as very helpful or helpful. Only 8% of respondents described available resources as a little helpful or not at all helpful. This finding sits in noticeable juxtaposition to qualitative comments about challenges faced within museums in relationship to representing and working across differences and could be affected by the position held by the respondent as CEO or Director of the museum.



Resources varied by nation. Significantly more Canadian respondents than US respondents engaged in collaborative planning across museums (83% vs 68%).

The graph on the left shows that significantly more Canadian respondents than U.S. respondents engaged in collaborative planning across museums.

Challenges

Despite DEAI statements and available resources, respondents reported several challenges in their work. No single issue emerged as primary, indicating that respondents viewed many challenges as important. On a scale of 1-5, (1 = most significant and 5 = least significant), respondents ranked the following:

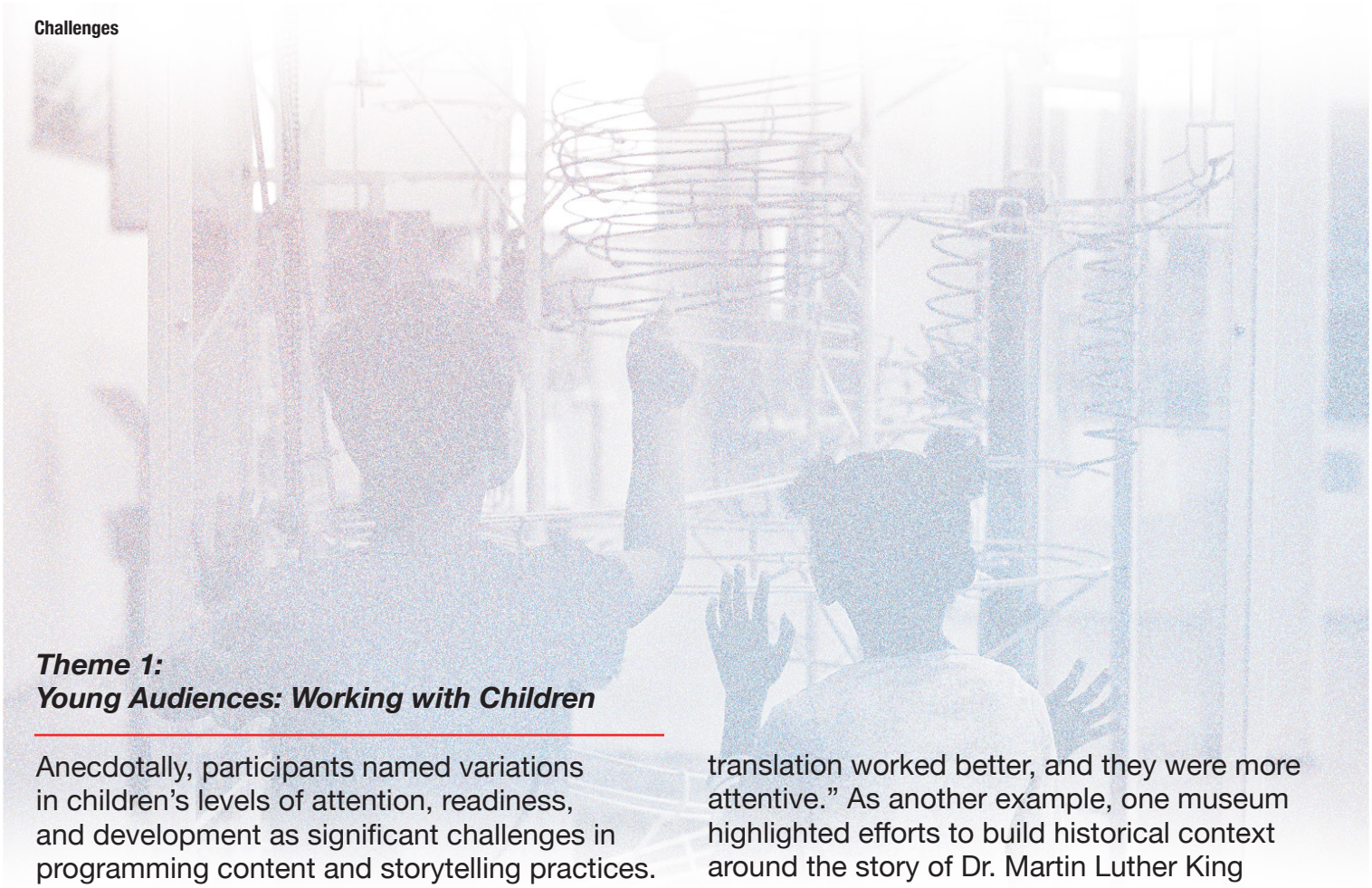
- framing stories that are understandable to children (2.49/5)
- representing communities that are not one's own (2.58/5)
- involving storytellers from diverse and/or marginalized communities (2.83/5)
- involving Indigenous knowledge keepers, storytellers, and Elders (3.27/5)
- representing difficult topics or traumatic content (3.30/5)

Challenges were relatively stable across nation, target audiences, programming topics, and the status of DEAI statements.

Challenges: Themes

Respondents were also asked to describe an example of a challenge experienced or observed in their work at children's museums. Of 106 participants, 87 offered open-ended responses. Qualitative responses mirrored and deepened quantitative responses, but also painted a more nuanced portrait.

The four most common challenges described in qualitative responses included: adapting and presenting materials to young audiences (n=26), establishing relationships with storytellers and members of specific communities (n=24), ethical concerns around telling other people's stories (n=19), and resistance or conflict raised by visitors, usually from those with more conservative political leanings (n=18).



Theme 1: Young Audiences: Working with Children

Anecdotally, participants named variations in children's levels of attention, readiness, and development as significant challenges in programming content and storytelling practices. For example, materials made for younger children, ages 0-6, sometimes did not hold the attention of older children, ages 7-12, and vice versa. As one respondent mentioned: "One challenge I've experienced is coaching our very smart and intellectual staff members to recognize the need to present information in ways that are engaging and appropriate for young children and meet varying learning styles. Wordy text panes do not work with this crowd."

As well, attempts by museums to use multiple languages or discuss complex topics sometimes challenged engagement for young children. Some participants shared the need for more professional development and explained adjustments that were made in response. For example, "After observing two different styles - reading an entire story in one language, then in English, versus a page-by-page translation. For younger children, the page-by-page translation worked better, and they were more attentive." As another example, one museum highlighted efforts to build historical context around the story of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s and his legacy. "We worked hard to put these into words and experiences that were developmentally accessible to our guests while also not shying away from the realities."

One of the biggest challenges involved moments when invited guests or storytellers lacked experience working with young children. These challenges required museums to help speakers be better prepared with ideas on how to sustain engagement, use age-appropriate language, or incorporate paraphrasing, illustrations, or props in their presentations. As one museum respondent shared: "The most common challenge we run into is that many storytellers or performers are not used to working with such young audiences. We help storytellers adapt or adjust, as needed, for younger audiences and it has helped to form strong, collaborative relationships with several storytellers and performers."

Theme 2: Making Connections and Sustaining Relationships

Making connections and sustaining relationships with outside communities was another common challenge shared by museums. One museum noted difficulties in "finding people willing to share their experiences" and "getting local presenters" to facilitate programs or share stories. Other museums shared the challenge of securing "in-person access to diverse voices in the community" while another reflected, "We hosted a series called *Cuentacuentos* "storytelling" and found it very difficult to find partners/presenters to share their expertise/time with our audiences."

For some museums, the ability to successfully run diverse programming was largely dependent on the participation of certain storytellers. Without such authentic partnerships, museums found themselves unable to sustain their storytelling work. About this, one museum shared, "We had a strong relationship with one Spanish-speaking storyteller, but as that relationship ebbed and flowed, so did our access to their stories." This was again mentioned in another context as, "We have difficulty hiring Indigenous interpreters, so we are not able to offer activities or characters with the legitimate voice of the Mi'kmaw people" (translated from French). In these cases, museums decided that they were not able to tell other people's stories at all and shifted their programming based on the identities and positionalities of the individuals within their own circle of storytellers and staff.

Despite such efforts to diversify programming through invited guests and storytellers, the question of effecting lasting change at the institutional level remained a concern for several museum respondents. As one respondent wrote: "...the lack of diversity still inherent in museum staff due to the colonial nature of the institutions makes it hard for us to meet the needs of the community." This same respondent continued, "We need more resources to diversify our staff and expand our ability to provide the public with what they want." Another museum respondent hoped to form "long-lasting relationships with local Indigenous communities [as well as] create representation within our organization." Yet even in such museums, responsibilities sometimes fell disproportionately on specific individuals. For example, one respondent shared, "Although we do have Indigenous staff, their time is often so full it is hard to have their support," while another highlighted the difficulty of partnering with "Native communities who have the time to work with our museum."

Theme 3: Telling Other People's Stories: Ethical Considerations

Outreach and engagement often raised questions about overburdening, appropriation, and misrepresentation. Efforts to program diverse perspectives and stories were often complicated by the largely homogenous (usually White) racial identity and positionality of museum educators and directors. For example: "One challenge we face in our community is a lack of diversity. We do our best to make sure the stories we're telling come from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, but we don't have in-person access to diverse voices in the community to ensure that what we're doing on a day-to-day basis is a respectful and responsible narrative to tell." Similarly, another museum respondent noted, "With such a small staff team, we often cannot represent all of the diversity of our local community. This leads us to rely on partnerships, 'special guests' and/or volunteers to aid in this process."

Most museums expressed interest in curating exhibits that thoughtfully represented diversity. Concerns over respect came up frequently in their examples. Yet even as museums worked to establish collaborative relationships, these were sometimes established through internal decisions or staff meetings of which visitors may be unaware. One museum respondent commented: "Even though we create our Indigenous programming content in collaboration with our Indigenous Initiatives team and they have empowered non-Indigenous folks to present the content, our guests do not have that context and may assume that we are appropriating knowledge." Other internal challenges were balancing museum programming with appropriate storytelling protocols and citation practices, such as telling a certain Indigenous story only during snowfall, or changing the choice of story when museums were unable to "find printed sources by Indigenous writers to credit."

In response to the challenge of telling other people's stories, some museums cited deliberate efforts to establish and sustain relationships with diverse communities. One respondent shared: "We often conduct outreach with individuals who represent communities about which our story times are centered. For example, inviting someone who practices Islam to read a book about Eid, a member of the local NAACP branch to read for Black History Month, or a member of a local LGBTQIA student group to read for Transgender Day of Visibility. However, not only is it difficult to bring in readers, it is also tricky to do so in a manner that does not feel tokenistic. We are actively brainstorming how to better tackle this issue."

Some museums were consistently in discussion about the terms of their relationships and expressed concerns over tokenism or overburdening others. This was particularly salient for museums whose staff did not represent the kinds of diversity that they wished to represent through their museum work. For example, one respondent explained, "We have an all-white staff and our museum is on a tribal reservation. I have started to work with the tribe to build that relationship... but we are not native, and we have not found a way to build this without feeling like we are asking too much of the tribe."

Theme 4: Resistance from Visitors

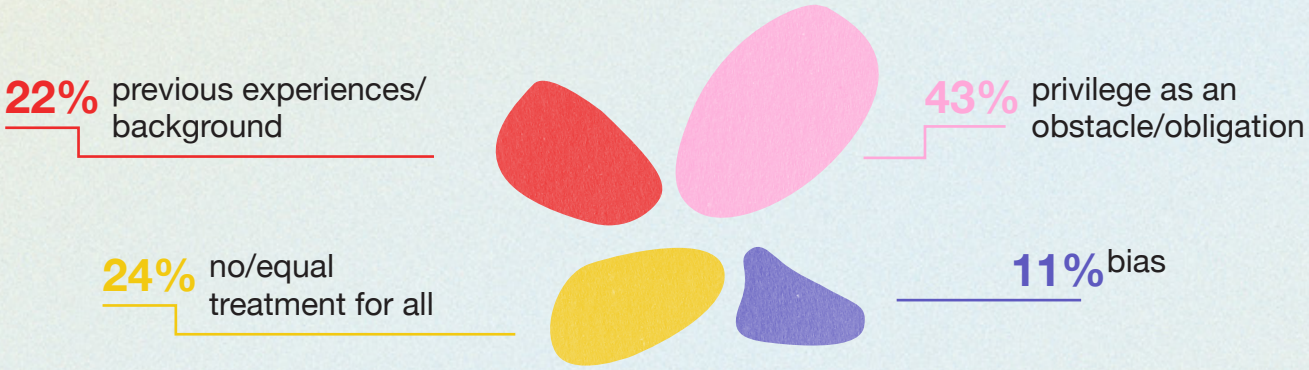
Museum respondents also shared how they were challenged by visitors who expressed dissatisfaction or resistance to programming decisions made by museums. These emotions sometimes veered into feelings of anger, complaint, and in one case, a threat of violence. In most cases, such feelings were expressed by those whose religious, political, or historical beliefs and ideologies were shaken by alternative perspectives. One respondent noted, "Some visitors are not open to or prepared to hear stories from a different point of view from their own. They express anger at having their own view of the past challenged or questioned." Another museum respondent shared a more specific example: "We have a planetarium where we include Indigenous storytellers to talk about the sky, constellations, and their creation story. We had a Christian school group that was upset over the creation story told by the Indigenous storytellers. To find a middle ground and educate is a sensitive topic sometimes."

Some respondents shared how they were pressured to bend to the demands made by certain museum visitors. "Conservative patrons were outraged by a children's book we included in our in-house, temporary gallery about race relations. They complained of the CRT agenda. We ultimately removed the book from the gallery." Other attacks were made by individuals who sought an end to Drag Queen story hour. One respondent relayed, "During the Drag Queen story time, the families in attendance were very engaged with the story. However, in marketing prior to the event the museum received many negative reactions and phone calls about our choice to offer this program."

These examples demonstrate how public opinion also mattered when making decisions about museum programming, which in some cases effectively compromised the aims and mission of the museum itself.

Social Positionality and Self-Reflection: Themes

The survey invited respondents to reflect on how their identity affects how they think about and carry out their work with children. Of 106 participants, 88 offered open-ended responses. Four main themes emerged:



Theme 1:
Previous Experiences and Background

Several museum respondents (n=19) considered how their identity, rooted in previous experiences and contexts, informed their work. These responses commented on how diverse personal, familial, and cultural experiences could shape programming in positive and critically-informed ways.

For instance, one respondent identified how, as "a daughter of immigrant parents," they were motivated to advocate "for educational equity, language accessibility and community engagement best practices" while another remarked, "I think my identity as a Black person impacts my strategic focus on encouraging the recruitment of diverse staff to work at children's museum, and a focus on engaging diverse communities to visit the museum." Another respondent centered religious diversity and wrote how their experience as "a member of a minority religion" informed their efforts "to reach out and seek ideas and opinions of those who have different experiences and backgrounds as mine" with the ultimate aim "to check in and ensure that our museum is sensitive and accepting of all who come to experience our museum." Yet another respondent who identified "as a queer person" wrote that they were "always thinking about using language that includes many different kinds of families." Still another commented on their unique intersectional position in sharing that "...being visibly trans is meaningful to me when I work with children; it's not uncommon for me to meet a kid who has never met an adult trans person. My autism is less visible but it influences the ways I think and my dedication to DEAI throughout my work."

Sometimes, respondents referenced their proximity to family or significant others as impactful to their commitments. One respondent wrote, "Growing up I had 3 members of my immediate family who had a disability. As such I am heavily influenced in the work I do for DEAI." Another respondent described their experiences as an "adult child of an Alcoholic child of divorce" and a "sister of a person with Down syndrome" as connected to their outlook, which they described as, "Empathy heavy, people forward, family forward, can admit my own mistakes - learn and move forward." Still another acknowledged their increasing awareness of their "privilege as a white cis-person" and that "as the mother of a non-binary child, I also am realizing the role I play in making sure children see people 'like them' in our programs and exhibits."

Theme 2: Privilege as an Obstacle and Obligation to Do Better

Most respondents (n=38) also reflected on their racial privilege as presenting an obstacle and obligation to do better. Identity presented an obstacle for one respondent who wrote, "I think my identity gets in the way as I try to navigate improved relationships with [Indigenous Peoples] in my community. I get caught up in my fear of saying or doing something wrong, and that fear ends up negatively impacting the work." However, they also acknowledged that they cannot remain in this place and added that they "have developed a concrete plan for moving forward in a way that turns the volume down on my own internal fears and propels me forward out of progress instead of leaving me (and my organization) frozen in fear."

Another participant described how their inability to understand experiences firsthand presented an obstacle for them: "as a white person I can never understand the lived experience of BIPOC or LGBTQ++ visitors, collaborators, staff, or colleagues." At the same time, they considered how their privilege could motivate actions "to mitigate this deficit" by "work[ing] with a variety of partners," and added why a collaborative approach is important, "particularly as a person in a leadership capacity, in a hierarchal system, in a museum (which in itself is a tool of colonization)."

Still another respondent wrote of their identity as "cause for reflection" conjuring questions such as "in what ways does my identity come with explicit and implicit privilege? In what ways might my identity be a perceived barrier to authentic engagement with my coworkers, guests, and the community? And how might my identity create unconscious bias in creating strategies to lead the museum forward?" This respondent further reflected on actions taken as a result of these questions, and specifically, their aim to "do my best to own my place of privilege and power and acknowledge continued areas I may not see so that others around me can collaborate with me in ways that help ensure our work is lifting all kids."

Others focused, too, on the obligations presented by race privilege, for instance, as one respondent commented, "I try to balance my acknowledged privilege with [my] obligation to take a step back, make space for others, listen, and show up as an ally." Similarly, another respondent shared, "I carry a responsibility to focus organizational resources on providing for children experiencing participation barriers or come from communities and identities traditionally excluded." An additional respondent acknowledged their "place of privilege as a white middle-class person" together with their "hope that by working in the museum world, I can help elevate children's voices in the community, regardless of their race, family income, family situation, physical or cognitive capabilities."

Theme 3: No or Equal Treatment of All

A good number of participants (n=21) responded that their identity did not impact their work or emphasized their efforts to support children's learning and treat all children equally, irrespective of identity claims. For instance, one respondent wrote: "My focus is to ensure this museum is a place of positive energy and acceptance for all who attend. Our common goal when here is to promote children's development in many ways." Still another respondent shared their view that: "Belonging and inclusion are critical to learning for all" while another explained: "My approach is to be welcoming and accommodating to everyone I encounter, both professionally and personally." For another respondent, identity was not a factor: "My identity is irrelevant to the work we do. People are people. We treat them all with kindness." Similarly, another shared: "I treat people kindly and welcoming. What I think or feel does not necessarily impact and affect my work as they are two separate things."

Theme 4: Bias

Some responses (n=10) considered how their identity created bias and shared their efforts to acknowledge and track bias for negative impacts. Unlike respondents who reflected on their privilege in theme two, these respondents framed bias more as an individual experience of which to be aware than an effect of systemic inequity.

As one respondent wrote, "Inherent bias is always a factor to be aware of" while another respondent acknowledged bias by reflecting on how their "lived experience may...make me unaware of challenges/needs/concerns of other groups." This respondent added that they "strive to be sensitive and seek input from others." Similarly, another wrote: "I think all of my lived experience related to identity affects my approach to working with children, which is why it's important to pause and ask questions related to perspective and equity." Some respondents shared their efforts to counter bias by actively seeking out diverse perspectives. For example: "Everyone has their biases and their own lived experience that impacts how they understand the world and how the world perceives us, so I think for myself it's very important that I work with colleagues and collaborators who have different lived experience from me to provide the insights into the type of work that we should be doing." Another considered how their "perspective does not represent the perspective of how the children in our community experience the world" and further reflected on how, through this awareness, they can "strive to develop and present programming that better fits their needs, instead of assuming their needs are the same as mine."

Conclusions and Implications

This survey provided insights about the place of social studies – including diverse and sometimes difficult topics – in children's museums located in the US and Canada. A key theme running through the survey was the importance of children's museums in supporting children's self-expression and exploration as well as the value of storytelling practices to activate curiosity and promote empathy for diverse perspectives and experiences.

Another key theme running through the findings was a tension between institutional commitments to Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion and pedagogical concerns about children's development, including their perceived readiness to engage certain topics. Often, programming topics addressing socio-historic events were reserved for older children while programming for younger children were less likely to engage these topics. Children's age and developmental readiness appear to remain major factors – and challenges – in efforts to represent diverse and difficult knowledge.

In addition, findings pointed to variations across national borders that suggest differences in political milieux with respect to truth and reconciliation and anti-racist approaches to education. At the time of the survey, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's "Calls to Action" (2015) – while imperfect – had been in circulation for nearly 10 years, with the possible effect of creating conditions within public institutions that encourage reflection about their implication in ongoing colonial legacies. At the same time, deep political polarization in the US has led to increased challenges and sometimes attacks of institutions that seek to engage a critical redress of past historical violences. Emboldened attacks, book bans, and concerted efforts to take down Critical Race Theory and DEAI initiatives and programs have become more pronounced since the Presidential elections of 2016 and 2024, and the Movement for Black Lives. In Canada, too, we note a rising tide of the conservative Right and coinciding backlash against decolonial and anti-racist initiatives. Our findings should be read in the context of these shifting and volatile times, particularly in the US where there have been significant closures of programs and initiatives geared toward issues of equity, diversity, accessibility, and inclusion.

While museums offer and utilize a range of professional development resources and supports, respondents articulated concerns and challenges. These included concerns about how social identity – and in particular race privilege and the implication of museums in colonial legacies – creates obstacles in making connections to community, representing diverse topics, and engaging families and children themselves. Museum respondents also raised concerns about resistance from certain communities in response to museums' efforts to engage diverse topics that were considered difficult or inappropriate for children. In this context, respondents often drew on personal experiences, whether immediately their own or their relationships with family, friends, and communities to inform their commitments to "do better" in addressing diverse and difficult topics.

Overall, the findings document museums' efforts to address and challenge the colonial legacies they also inherit. Findings demonstrate a need for continuing efforts to diversify programming (particularly with younger children), including the need to diversify representation among museum educators, directors, and staff, and to create and care for communities of practice guided by principles of allyship and solidarity.

Recommendations

1

Provide professional learning/workshops on issues and resources relating to the representation of social difference and difficult knowledge with children:

This recommendation is informed by study findings and a critical turn within critical museology and childhood studies that historcizes and deconstructs childhood innocence as a property of white privilege (Bernstein, 2011; Garlen, 2019) and instead highlights the importance of creating "brave spaces" in which children can engage difficult knowledge from the multiple intersectional positions they embody (Gallas, 2021, p. 27). However, as Deborah Britzman (2000) notes, difficult knowledge requires careful handling since it can spark painful emotions that defend against the knowledge on offer. Roger I. Simon (2011) and Angela Failler (2015) focus on the challenges of exhibiting difficult knowledge in public, and namely the institution of the museum. When it comes to working with children, Kyo MacLear (2017) notes additional challenges that require educators to take into account the impacts of anxiety in childhood and the need for emotional containment in presenting difficult material. Against this backdrop, MacLear cautions against strategies that, while intended to mobilize positive change, can have the unintended effect of invoking spellbinding anxiety, despair and withdrawal. MacLear (2017) instead highlights the value of artistic forms – such as animation, fantasy, and speculative fiction – that can invite children to engage difficult knowledge while imagining new formations of community and possible futures.

2

Invite continuing reflection on social positionality in relation to museum work; include professional development on self-reflection, solidarity, and allyship:

This recommendation draws from study findings and existing research that advocates for self-reflection and allyship in both museums and schools (Ng, Ware & Greenberg, 2017). Allyship brings people into relation as implicated subjects from varying entry points, and in this way disrupts Susan Dion's (2022) "perfect stranger" position: a term she uses to denote "an avoidance tactic" that can be heard in claims such as: "I can't teach this content, I know nothing about Indigenous people, I have no Indigenous friends, I didn't grow up near a reserve, I didn't learn anything when I was in school" (p. 19). Dion (2022) rather advocates for an alternative stance – what she calls the "not-so-perfect stranger" – that shifts from a defensive "turning away" to a "turning toward" with a desire to know more about the self in relation to Indigenous Peoples and histories, which also means acknowledging the silences, refusals, and misinformation that have shaped and continue to shape these relations (p. 19). Dion's not-so-perfect stranger dovetails with Wendy Ng, Syrus Marcus Ware, and Alyssa Greenberg's (2017) discussion of allyship within museum spaces that emphasizes the value of de-centring the self, listening and self-reflection, consciously and constantly learning, and taking direction without defensiveness. The recommendation is to risk "turning toward" colonial histories that neither children nor educators have themselves made and for which we are nonetheless responsible.

3

Diversify staffing without tokenism:

This recommendation resonates with research in museum studies that documents a gap between diverse demographics of children/youth visitors and the demographics of museum educators, who are predominantly White (Fuentes, 2021). For instance, Alexandra Olivares and Jaclyn Piatak (2021) find that museum staff often do not represent the diversity of museum audiences, despite efforts within the sector to create more inclusive and diverse programming. In addition to diversifying programs, Jessica Fuentes (2021) foregrounds the importance of increasing diversity among museum educators themselves. As Fuentes (2021) proposes, increased diversity among educators would create a greater sense of connection with diverse child/youth audiences as well as disrupt stereotypes and lowered expectations that are routinely ascribed to racially minoritized children and youth. At the same time, there should be no assumption that racially minoritized educators can speak on behalf of entire communities (Ng, Ware & Greenberg, 2017). The recommendation then runs in two directions: to increase diversity among museum staff without also downloading the responsibility of representing minoritized perspectives to them alone. Here, we gesture back to recommendation #2, which invites all educators to reflect on social positionality to inform equity-oriented work.

4

Support the integration of counter-stories in museum programming and practices by sharing examples, resources, and models across institutions and borders:

This recommendation underscores cross-institutional and cross-sector collaborations as fertile ground to support the integration of counter stories in museum programming and practices. Here, we draw from respondents' articulations of the importance of relationships within their own sector and with external partners, including schools and community. The importance of these relationships aligns with longstanding research findings that underline the value of community engagement, shared authority, and polyvocality in curation and collections (Golding & Modest, 2013; Morse & Munro, 2015). For children's museums, community engagement may also include teachers and schools. In their edited collection entitled, *Museums and Schools* (2023), Giuseppe Pino Monaco and Megan Wood offer examples and practices that define and build successful school-museum ties made from "a sustained relationship" and "the desire to work together toward a common goal" (Monaco & Wood, 2023, p. 6). In addition to cross-sector collaborations, museums may also find value in cross-border discussions within the museum community itself as opportunities to share best practices and problem-solving strategies in efforts to integrate counter-stories representing diverse and sometimes difficult knowledge with children.

5

Include children in programming – particularly from marginalized communities:

This recommendation is informed by study findings that highlight the role of museum programming and practices in supporting children's active learning and self-expression. This finding aligns with current research that advocates for the integration of children's perspectives and vision in museum programming and curation (Gordillo Martorell, 2024; Hamer, 2019; Patterson, 2021). For instance, Monica Patterson (2021) offers the term "critical children's museology" to explore museological approaches that produce "museum content not just for and about children, but by and with them" (p. 331). From this vantage, Patterson (2021) offers the example of the "Anything Goes" exhibition at the National Museum in Warsaw, which actively involved children in curatorial processes and catalogue production (see also Golding & Modest, 2013). In the hands of young curators, Patterson notices how "standard curatorial features" were "given unique twists" and bore out surprising juxtapositions, for instance, in children's eye-level displays of "famous works" alongside "unknown and never-before-exhibited items" (p. 333). Naomi Hamer (2019), too, considers how "childhood artifacts" featured in "story museums" add a critical edge to "the active play environments and learning stations of science-oriented children's museums" (p. 391). Hamer offers three examples of story museums in the United States, England, and Denmark – all of which foreground representations of childhood in art, literature, and picture books filtered through scenes of uncertainty and conflict that disrupt "idealized discourses of the creative child that often underlie hands-on engagements" (p. 391).

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