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Early Childhood Education Teachers' Encounters With Art Presented in Museums and Galleries: Selected Aspects

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Abstract

Research objectives, issues or problems: The aim of the research was to ascertain the opinions and efforts of early childhood education teachers in organising children's encounters with art in museums/galleries. The research question was "what activities do teachers undertake to familiarise students with the art distributed by institutions that provide visual objects of artistic value?"

Research methods: The study used a diagnostic survey method with a questionnaire aimed at teachers teaching years 1–3 in primary school.

A short description of the context of the presented issue: Museums, galleries and other such institutions are organisational forms of cultural

activity and can be an important element of the classes prepared by teachers to create opportunities for pupils to learn about, experience and value works of art. Children's contact with works of art in institutions providing objects of artistic value not only awakens their interests, but also encourages them to act creatively, develops their perceptiveness, practices their ability to conduct thorough analyses, express reasoned opinions and pose questions and develops their sensitivity and aesthetic taste.

Research findings: The results show that although the majority of teachers perceive a very important role of venues promoting art in the process of enriching knowledge and forming attitudes of active consumers among early school-aged children, a large proportion of them still do not sufficiently notice the value and impact of these venues in shaping children's intellectual interests and personality.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: In summary, the teacher, carrying out the tasks set out in the curricula and supported by the institutions and the state (e.g. teacher training, free entry for children, online offers sent to schools and temporary exhibitions aimed at young viewers), can additionally implement and/or complement activities to make museum exhibitions attractive and effective for pupils.

Keywords: encounters with art, museums, galleries, teacher, early childhood education

The importance of children's encounters with the arts

The search for effective ways to teach a person concerns the knowledge acquired and the skills, abilities and attitudes formed. As Irena Wojnar (1984, pp. 9–19) emphasises in her book, *Teoria wychowania estetycznego* [The Theory of Aesthetic Upbringing], besides intellectual upbringing, an important part of the educational process is the aspect of activating spiritual forces and moral attitudes and stimulating the individual's imagination and sensitivity. Writing about humanistic education, she emphasises its important links with cultural values, among which the most important is the concept of education through art, the theoretical foundations

of which were formed by Herbert Read. The emergence of this term did not contribute to the abandonment of the earlier term – *aesthetic upbringing* – but it did make it possible to present the duality of this concept: in a narrower sense, understood as upbringing for art, and in a broader sense, described as upbringing through art. Polish scholars also contributed to the dissemination of this concept, including Stefan Szuman, Bogdan Suchodolski, Irena Wojnar, Maria and Tadeusz Gołaszewski.

The concepts of education for and through art are realised by contemporary museums – non-profit organisations – and their objectives include “collecting and permanently protecting the goods of the natural and cultural heritage of mankind ..., disseminating the fundamental values of Polish and world history, science and culture, developing cognitive and aesthetic sensitivity and enabling the use of the collections” (Act of 21 November 1996 on museums, Art. 1). Museums fulfil many purposes, including educational activities and making collections available for these purposes (Act of 21 November 1996 on museums, Art. 2). The multifunctionality of these social institutions includes the functions of popularising and educating (Turos, 1999, pp. 43). In a broad sense, museum education – by initiating processes and activities that support the development of the individual in many spheres of life (knowledge, skills and self-realisation) – becomes part of cultural education (Sani, 2013). Among the new ones with a special dimension is the entertainment function. Museum pedagogy and museum education, as Renata Pater (2016, 2013, pp. 56) rightly states, are gradually changing the image of the museum in public perception. In their programmes of educational activities and museum exhibitions, museum educators take into account the latest psycho-pedagogical, pedagogical and sociological knowledge, referring to learning theories, cognitive processes and the concept of multiple intelligences.

It is also worth noting that developments in catering for museum audiences since the 1960s (much later in Poland) have been moving away from a passive form of receiving content, towards activating audiences through diverse “attempts to educate them ‘to’, ‘in’ and ‘through’ the museum” (Skutnik, 2019, pp. 258). Art galleries are also organisational forms

of cultural activity (Act of 25 October 1991 on the organisation and performance of cultural activities) and, like museums, can be an important part of teachers' work, providing opportunities for pupils to explore, experience and value works of art.

As venues for encounters with art, museums, galleries and other such institutions are nowadays also open to the needs of children and look for effective educational solutions to support children's cognitive experiences. They create inspiring spaces of varying quality, size and diversity with high educational potential for those involved in the embodiment of culture.

The experience of the museum, the possibility of interaction and the enrichment from an awareness of history, culture and traditions gained through the museum education programme promotes the multi-intelligent development of children. Researchers emphasise above all the cultural, educational and social significance of the museum and the constructive way of learning during museum visits. Particularly valuable are the various museum situations through which attitudes, interests and experiences are formed. There are also international interviews with children about what they think of museums, how they develop a sense of belonging to a region or country and pride in its traditions, culture and achievements and how they evaluate museum visits and contact with museum professionals.

Today, quantitative and qualitative research is being conducted on museum pedagogy in England (Tzibazi, 2018, 2022), museum education of preschool and younger school-aged children and its impact on their cognitive development in China (Tan et al., 2021), the impact on scientific and social skills in the Netherlands and Australia (Andre et al., 2017) and forging the child as a subject by experiencing, engaging and acting in the museum space in Norway (Yates et al., 2022). It should be noted that learning from culture and the educational programmes of museums and galleries have been written about and researched by the English researcher Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2007, pp. 252).

In Poland, research on the museum perceived as an educational space has been conducted by Tadeusz Gołaszewski (1967, pp. 96), Bogdan

Grzegorzewski (1978, pp. 98) and Lucjan Tuross (1999, pp. 216). Today, Jolanta Skutnik (2008, pp. 197) writes about the museum as a place of education, additionally created in children's drawings. An analysis of methods of presenting and teaching about art in the context of exhibition practices has been published by the art historian Marcin Szelaq (2014, pp. 92). Also, research on museum education aimed at diverse audiences, including children, has been conducted by Renata Pater (2016, pp. 228) and presented in a book with practical implications of her own ongoing research project. These are just some of the names of those working on the issue of education by and for art in museums and galleries.

An important place in the process of humanistic education is held by children's museums (the first children's museum, Brooklyn Children's Museum, was founded in the late 19th century), because when organising exhibitions, they implement "programmes that stimulate informal learning and experience for children. The ... children's museum is dominated by interactive exhibitions, designed in such a way that the youngest viewers do not remain passive. ... The space is built with interactive play, learning and discovery in mind" (Martyka, 2012, pp. 132). It is action, creation, design and early positive experiences that become the basis for children's effective learning and attitude formation as active viewers of art.

As early as the beginning of the 20th century, in Wanda Ciot-Mazowiecka's (1907) methodological study for teachers of folk schools, one of the tips relating to the teaching of drawing spoke of pupils visiting exhibitions where "the teacher will try with the right questions to stimulate the pupils to realise what the artist wanted to depict in his work" (pp. 14). To reinforce and consolidate the impression, she suggested viewing only a few works of art at a time. In addition, she suggested holding an exhibition at the end of the school year, as it influences the development of a country's education and is one of the links "binding the school with the broad circles of the general public" (Ciot-Mazowiecka, 1907, pp. 14). This suggestion would also prepare children for encounters with art in institutions.

The natural ability to experience beauty is present from an early age. Exposing children to works of art in institutions for objects of artistic value

not only awakens their interest, but also encourages artistic activity, develops perceptiveness, practices the ability to express reasoned opinions, pose questions and conduct thorough analyses (describing objects and distinguishing their characteristic features) and develops sensitivity and aesthetic taste (Piwowska, 2012, pp. 203–204). Therefore, it is important that teachers take care to organise conditions of cognition that arouse children's interest in art, which is a source of knowledge relating to both ancient and contemporary human cultural heritage (Piwowska, 2019, pp. 117).

Museums and galleries are among the many places where there is a direct encounter between the viewer and works of art, in this case visual art with artistic values. Teachers, or those mediating in this process and referred to by Stefan Szuman (1975) as "aesthetic educators", provide "someone who is not yet able to do so, or who is not very able to do so, with effective assistance in discovering, learning and feeling the aesthetic features and values of artistic works. ... The naive viewer perceives a work of art in extra-aesthetic terms. He is still aesthetically 'blind' to artistic works" (p. 119).

The teacher plays a crucial role in linking educational activities with the work of museums and art galleries. Their attitude and ability to plan, make knowledge accessible, select exhibitions and influence their reception can aid in raising children in the future to be viewers of museum exhibitions (Pavlon, 2022). At this point, it can be asked which activities today's teachers take to this end and what their attitude is towards organising excursions with the younger children to make accessible collections with artistic values.

Research methodology

The subject of the empirical research was the activities undertaken by teachers to organise children's encounters with art in galleries/museums, while the research question was which activities are undertaken by early childhood education teachers to familiarise pupils with art disseminated

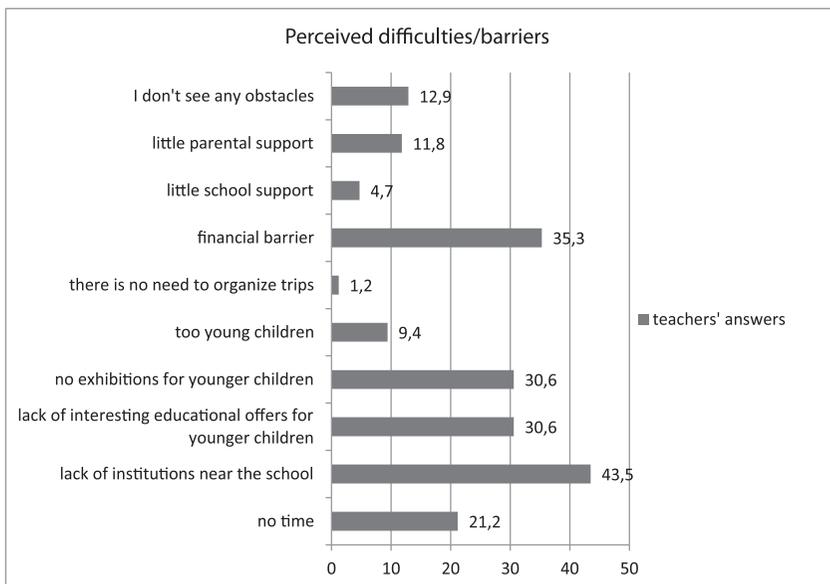
by the relevant institutions. Because the research was conducted from April to the end of September 2022, when museums and galleries had only just begun to operate without the limits and restrictions stipulated for cultural institutions since 28 February of that year, the survey questions were related to the pre-pandemic period, the period in which the pandemic restrictions were loosened (they had been introduced on 1 February 2021) and the few months during which restrictions were lifted. It was important for the survey to investigate both the organisational side of exhibition outings and the role they can play in early childhood education. Therefore, the questions in the survey addressed the difficulties perceived by teachers with regard to organising pre-pandemic trips to exhibitions in art galleries/museums (the period without restrictions was very short), as well as preparing children for visits, taking advantage of events at museums, following cultural events organised by these institutions, tailoring visits to the needs of younger audiences and the role these venues play in the process of teaching and forming the attitude of an active audience among early school-aged children. Closed questions (see Figures 3 and 6) and semi-open questions (see Figures 1, 2, 4 and 5) (15 questions) were answered by 85 early childhood education teachers from schools in larger towns (more than 20,000 inhabitants [24.7% of the study group]), smaller towns (less than 20,000 inhabitants [41.2%]) and rural areas (34.1%) in the Silesian Voivodeship (mainly Częstochowa, Katowice and their surroundings) located within a short distance (with access to public transport) from museums and galleries. Although most of the questions were semi-open-ended, in only a few cases did the respondents formulate their answers themselves (see Figures 1, 2, 4 and 5).

The aim of the questionnaire (100 questionnaires were sent out to primary schools targeting early childhood education teachers and 85 were returned) was to ascertain the opinions and efforts of early childhood education teachers in organising children's encounters with art in museums/galleries. It became important to establish the perceived organisational difficulties of teachers in this area and the activities involved in preparing for visits to exhibitions.

Analysis of research results

When asked in the questionnaire about perceived difficulties organising pre-pandemic and post-pandemic trips with pupils to institutions promoting the arts, the teachers were given the opportunity to choose an answer from eight suggestions and to add their own responses. As can be seen from the data in Figure 1, they occasionally saw no need for trips to art galleries or museums, and in a few cases the lack of support from the school was an obstacle. A few respondents referred to the age of the pupils and the lack of support from parents; in isolated cases, the respondents did not see any obstacles. Thus, it can be concluded that the vast majority consider such outings to be justified, and that they mainly see the distance they have to travel with pupils to see an exhibition as a significant obstacle.

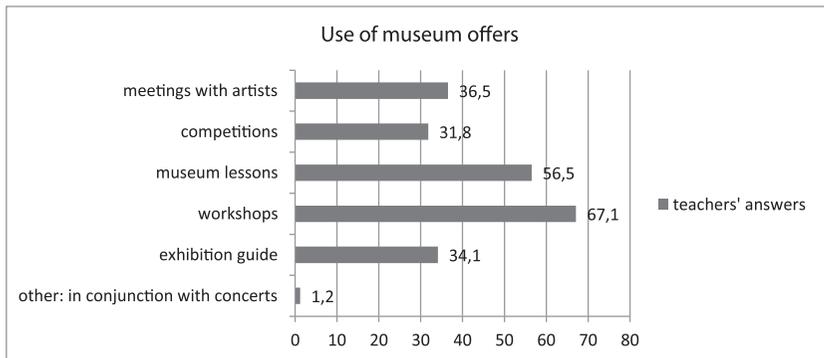
Figure 1. Teachers' perceptions of difficulties/barriers when organising outings to exhibitions at art galleries/museums



In addition, the data relating to teachers' perceived difficulties when organising trips for children to exhibitions before the pandemic (Figure 1) indicated that fewer than half of the respondents noted the lack of such institutions in the vicinity of the school. For about one in three respondents, the obstacles were funding and the scarcity of interesting exhibitions in museums or galleries for young children. One in five teachers perceived a lack of time for such excursions (most likely due to overloaded curricula). A small number of respondents did not perceive any obstacles or difficulties organising trips for pupils to exhibitions.

Unsurprisingly, for about half of the teachers mobility (due to distance) became the main obstacle to organising pupils' visits to exhibitions in art galleries/museums. However, the difficulties associated with the distance between the school and venues promoting the visual arts should not hamper the organisation of students' first contact with the cultural institutions – even if only once a year.

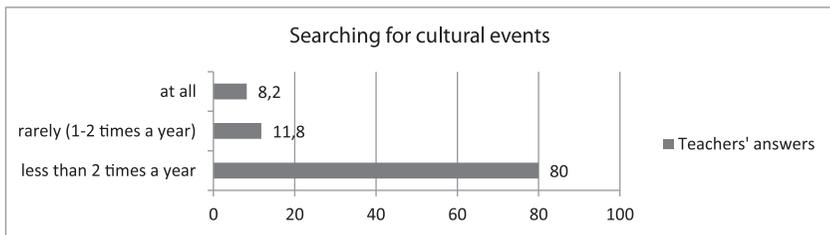
Figure 2. Museum events selected by teachers when taking students to art galleries/museums



The answers to the next question about early childhood education teachers' practical use of museum/gallery events (Figure 2) show that most of the respondents' students participate in museum workshops and activities offered by institutions that promote the arts. Approximately one in three respondents take advantage of possibilities such as meeting with artists and exhibition guides or competitions on art and art knowledge

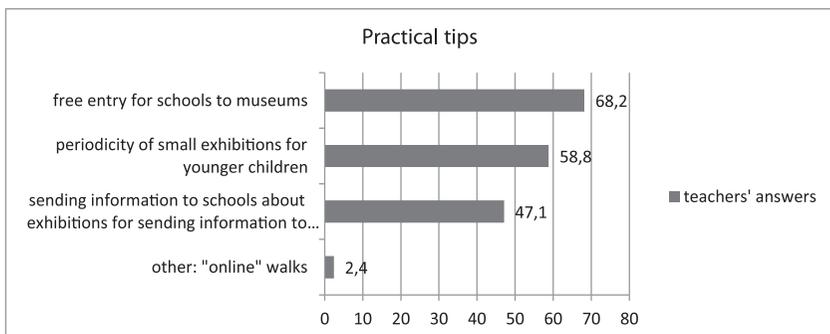
organised by galleries or museums. One teacher suggested that exhibitions for pupils in years 1–3 should be accompanied by concerts. This is an interesting solution (already used at many vernissages), but it would have to involve setting aside time for “live” music events during the visit. However, in an age with so many possibilities, not least thanks to digital technology, combining art and music should not pose a major problem.

Figure 3. Frequency of teachers searching for cultural events organised by art galleries/museums



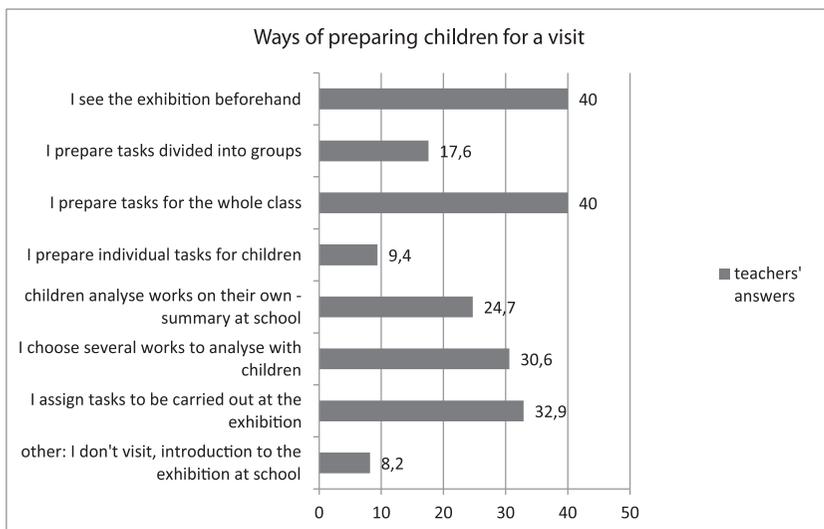
The data in Figure 3 indicate that a few teachers follow the cultural events organised by art galleries or museums sporadically or do not seek them out at all. However, the vast majority of respondents are interested in regular or occasional cultural events held by galleries and museums. This is a positive sign that indicates a high awareness among teachers and a need for exhibitions tailored to the needs and perceptual possibilities of younger pupils.

Figure 4: Practical tips given by teachers for art galleries/museums regarding the needs of young art viewers



The early childhood education teachers were asked about measures that would be more effective at encouraging young art audiences to attend exhibitions. The data in Figure 4 indicate that the majority of respondents noted free entry for schools and small-scale temporary exhibitions prepared for younger pupils as their practical tips. Quite a large group of respondents would like to be informed (notices sent to schools) about exhibitions for younger audiences. The needs indicated by teachers in this respect are an additional signal about the educational role played by children's visual contact with art.

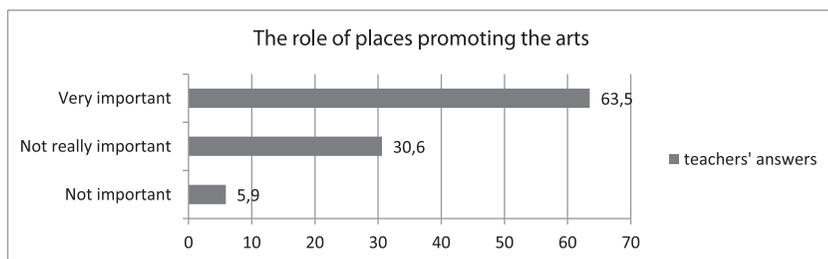
Figure 5: Ways in which teachers prepare children to visit art galleries/museums



The data shown in Figure 5 show that less than half of the respondents personally view the exhibits before going to an exhibition with their pupils. This fact is important in that it allows for the planning of lessons that focus on selected works of art and that take into account the cognitive abilities of students in years 1–3. Approximately one in three respondents noted that they select works of art for analysis, which is very important when introducing children to museum exhibitions. Some teachers prepare tasks aimed at the whole class, but unfortunately much

less often for group or individual work. One in three respondents only set tasks for children at the exhibition. Some educators (one in five) decide to analyse at school objects which the pupils have viewed on their own. Occasionally, teachers indicated that they do not take children to exhibitions or that they do not have a need to organise such excursions for younger classes. In addition, in their questionnaires they ticked the answer stating that children's viewing of exhibitions is of little importance for the process of enriching their knowledge and forming the attitude of an active viewer of art.

Figure 6. The role of venues promoting the arts in teaching and developing the attitude of an active audience among early childhood children



The issue of interest to us was the role of galleries and museums in the process of acquiring knowledge and forming attitudes of active art consumers among early school-aged children. From the data in Figure 6, it can be concluded that the majority of respondents appreciate the importance of these institutions for enriching pupils' knowledge and building the attitude of an active participant in such cultural events. However, almost one in three respondents believe that the role of institutions providing facilities of artistic value in this respect is minor. A few teachers, on the other hand, do not see a role at all. In summary, although the majority of teachers perceive the role of venues promoting art in the process of enriching knowledge and forming an attitude of active consumers among early school-aged children as very important, a large proportion of them still do not sufficiently notice the value and impact of these venues in shaping children's intellectual interests and personality.

The opinions indicated by the majority of teachers about the significant role that venues promoting the arts play in the process of enriching knowledge and shaping an attitude of an active consumer among early school-aged children can be confirmed by the majority of the respondents searching for interesting cultural events (Figure 3) and the need for organising child-orientated exhibitions and disseminating information about them to schools (Figure 4).

Conclusions of the study

The research on early childhood education teachers' encounters with art was conducted after the two-year epidemic in Poland. Therefore, the questions referred to the period before the pandemic and a few months after the restrictions were lifted. The analysis of the answers given by the teachers leads to the conclusion that, despite the possibility of travelling from schools to museums and galleries by public transport, almost half of the teachers consider travelling this distance as an organisational/logistical obstacle that sometimes makes it impossible to plan excursions to exhibitions. However, contrary to this opinion, the vast majority of them do organise such outings for their pupils. The follow-up questions show that they most often take advantage of the workshops and museum activities prepared by these institutions. Unfortunately, they participate less frequently in such interesting and motivating events for children's creative activity as competitions on art and art knowledge. This is all the more unfortunate because the final post-competition vernissages, which open exhibitions, are an attractive introduction for children to look at the collections and become active consumers of art.

The vast majority of the surveyed teachers follow cultural events organised by art galleries or museums regularly or from time to time, thus showing an interest in temporary or occasional cultural events that enrich their personal experience (self-improvement) and enable them to use this knowledge in their professional practice.

An important prerequisite for making the collections in museums and art galleries more accessible, as pointed out by the teachers of early childhood education, is free entry for pupils to exhibitions and the wide dissemination of information sent directly to schools about exhibitions aimed specifically at young art consumers. Thus, it can be assumed that the single free visiting days designated in some institutions (especially for permanent exhibitions) are not sufficient; in the case of temporary exhibitions, for which a fee usually has to be paid, many do not opt for them (financial barrier). In addition, the respondents highlighted the need for small, recurring exhibitions, primarily organised with younger audiences in mind.

Visits to exhibitions by pupils in years one to three should be planned because thorough preparation for the children's encounter with art is essential, so an important prerequisite for going to a museum or gallery should be that the teacher is familiar with the collections in advance. Unfortunately, not enough teachers make use of this opportunity. And yet, especially young pupils' first visits to museums should be an extraordinary experience, and information about selected objects of artistic value should be exceptionally attractive. This requires thorough preparation. Unfortunately, the research shows that only a few of the respondents select works to be analysed with children, most often choosing to assign tasks during joint viewing and without dividing the students into proactive groups.

Although the majority of the respondents emphasised the significant role of galleries and museums in enriching children's knowledge and forming an attitude of an active art consumer, some teachers attribute little importance to them. The question can be asked at this point is why? Are we as a teaching community sufficiently prepared to perceive art? An understanding of art and the ability to feel pleasure in its reception certainly makes it easier to introduce children to the world created by visual means of expression.

It is worth quoting Jolanta Skutnik (2008), who claims that a contemporary museum should

both foster the process of creation and enable active reception. ... That is why today's museums are increasingly trying to be active cultural

centres, centres of documentation, education, as well as centres of meetings and discussions supporting exhibition activities, combining classical museum functions with educational and dissemination – public functions. (pp. 20–21)

The teacher, carrying out the tasks set out in the curricula and supported by the institutions and the state (e.g. teacher training, free entry for children, online offers sent to schools or temporary exhibitions aimed at young viewers) can additionally implement and/or complement activities to make museum exhibitions attractive and effective for pupils.

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