

## **Tourism, cultural capital and the transformational power of education: Lessons from the Children's University Tasmania**

### **Abstract**

This tourism research project focuses on the local community rather than on tourists. It explores links between cultural capital, tourism and education in the community. Focusing on the Children's University Tasmania and its programs, this study looks at how tourist sites are transformed into learning destinations for residents. The goal of the programs is to enhance the cultural capital of children in less privileged segments of Tasmanian society. The initial results are promising. In the context of tourism studies, this study shows that the narrative of travel can stimulate the imagination of locals. The benefits of learning through (local) tourism experiences can be harnessed to support the broader social and economic goals of improved educational attainment for the young. This study essentially demonstrates how tourism resources are used for local and community development. Tourism should be better integrated to serve the social and educational needs of society.

### **Keywords**

community development, cultural capital, educational attainment, learning destinations, local tourism experiences

On a grey and chilly October 2017 morning, children from various local schools visited Government House in Hobart. The trip was organized by the Children's University Tasmania (CUTas). They met the Governor and toured the grand historical building. A buffet lunch of delicious finger food was served. Unfortunately it was not served outdoors because of the weather. Instead, it was served in a big stately hall. There were old and posh sofa seats and tables in the room, together with a grand piano. The sign on the piano asked people not to put glasses on it. Otherwise, people were welcomed to use the furniture. But initially the children, parents and carers sat on the floor after they collected their food. It was only later that the chairs were used, as the floor became a crowded picnic area. The Governor re-joined her guests; she eventually sat on the floor to talk to her young guests. The Governor was addressed as "Her Excellency" by her staffer, and her floor-sitting gesture showed her accessibility. But apparently her visitors were unused to such a formal setting. They seem to have encountered a symbolic barrier, and lacked the cultural capital to fit into the situation.

These children were experiencing tourism in their own backyard. Government House is one of many learning destinations identified by CUTas. In this ongoing project, we look at CUTas, and how it attempts to use tourism sites as learning resources in the local community. The initiative improves access to extra-curricular 'Learning Activities' to children aged 7 to 14, and engages the wider community as 'Learning Destinations' in the process. When a child becomes a member of CUTas they are given a 'Passport to Learning' in which they record their participation in activities at Learning Destinations. The passport is the same size and mirrors several characteristics of a real passport. The activities may include visits to galleries, museums, dance schools, sports clubs and heritage sites. After completing 30 hours of validated learning, their achievement is celebrated at a formal graduation ceremony, a

significant cultural experience itself. CUTas builds a bridge for parents and carers to visit places that they do not normally go in order to expose children to diverse cultural experiences. This research project focuses on the local community rather than on tourists. It explores links between cultural capital, tourism and education in the community.

### **Literature review: cultural capital, education, and tourism**

Educational attainment is widely regarded as a vehicle for social mobility. However, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) articulate in their theory of social reproduction, the different types of 'capital' children and their families possess may pose a barrier to social mobility. Some children are born into families where they are exposed to certain language styles and tastes and develop a broad appreciation for culture that they demonstrate in school. These styles, tastes and dispositions serve as a form of 'cultural capital' that children can convert into academic credentials (Dumais 2006).

The formal education system aims to offer a level playing field for all children to succeed in learning. Yet, the field is not level. The education system transmits, evaluates and celebrates selected cultural knowledge, forms and tastes (Bojczyk, Rogers-Haverback, Pae, Davis, & Mason, 2015; De Graaf, De Graaf, & Kraaykamp, 2000). Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds may not exhibit the embodied sense of cultural capital that supplements or enhances achievement in the formal education system. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital has enabled researchers to view cultural capital as a resource – one that provides scarce rewards and under certain conditions may be transmitted from one generation to the next.

Ethnographic research has shown that many kinds of extracurricular activities, beyond those that fall into the realm of high art, can serve as cultural resources in children's school experiences (Dumais, 2006). In this way, extra-curricular activities may level the playing field. While authors have written on tourism and educational benefits, there is hardly any literature on learning and tourist destinations. So, how does tourism fit into this discussion?

### **Observations and tentative results**

CUTas encourages tourism services to become validated Learning Destinations by highlighting its role as a tool to engage with the local community:

Being a Learning Destination is a great way to promote your organisation to the local community and to engage with young people in your service delivery. Learning Destinations can enrich communities and build valuable networks that help support children and their families in their educational journey (Children's University Tasmania, 2017).

The qualitative data gathered from school coordinators as part of the CUTas evaluation supports the claims that families also engage in a learning journey.

... [the] family has now become involved in visiting public Learning Destinations on weekends and holidays— they are looking through the destinations for opportunities they can follow up...Previously a lot of her weekend time was spent at home "filling" in time so the whole family have benefited and their outlook has been altered (SC24, personal communication).

The program offers/creates the opportunity for families to venture to surrounding sites they may never have gone to. This has been very evident as the parents and children have come to me with stories of their “adventure”. From one child wanting to go to a particular destination, a whole family enjoys the benefits.” (SC29, personal communication).

During a recent interview with an employee of CUTas it was observed that:

...it provides a structure for parents to understand how and what to engage in with kids outside of school... But I think that is important as parents struggle sometimes with knowing what to do. (CU1, personal communication)

Participation in Children’s University in the United Kingdom was found to change attitudes, encourage determination and perseverance, as well as ‘extending the horizons of the possible’ (MacBeath, 2013, p. 3).

Preliminary evaluation of CUTas suggests that the program is having a positive influence on school attendance, a sense of achievement and awareness of further learning as a pathway to a ‘dream’ job in the future (Eyles et al, 2017).

### **Conclusions: Applications of results**

This is work in progress. As we write this working paper, we are still conducting our fieldwork. Regardless, in place of a conclusion, there are already a few lessons to be learned.

The narrative of travel is a tool that can stimulate the imagination of locals. Tourism – a growing industry on the island of Tasmania – is a rich resource that can be drawn on in creative, fun and engaging ways to enhance the lives of its residents. The benefits of learning through tourism experiences can be harnessed to support the broader social and economic goals of improved educational attainment for the 112,884 children and young people who live in Tasmania.

CUTas is also about the adults. The role of parents, carers and home environments as influential agents on levels of educational engagement and attainment is well documented. Tasmanian families have higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage than the national average, with Tasmania the second most socio-economically disadvantaged jurisdiction in Australia. Parents from low socio-economic status backgrounds, in common with other parents, have aspirations for their children’s future. Yet, parents may need assistance to access destinations and develop the type of cultural capital that supports their visions for the future.

Finally, there are social and cultural benefits for local children and families participating in local tourism experiences. This study demonstrates how tourism resources are used for local and community development. Tourism policies often aim to bring tourism benefits to local society; this is easier said than done (Ooi, 2013). This study shows one concrete way that tourism can be made to serve the social and education needs of local society.

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