

Special educational programmes at the National Zoological Park, Santo Domingo

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Introduction

Since its inception in 1975, the Parque Zoológico Nacional (ZOODOM) at Santo Domingo, capital of the Dominican Republic, has worked for better teaching of the natural sciences. It has created educational programmes for children of all ages and levels of education. Having also recognized the need to help disabled children, it began in 1978/79 a series of courses specially conceived for their benefit.¹

With respect to the education of disabled children, the zoo's role must be one of receptiveness, kindness and guidance. Whatever its origin, a disability does not generally affect the learning ability of the child. But the teacher at the zoo must adapt his techniques considerably if he is to attain fully his teaching objectives. In the case of ZOODOM, we also aim to show, through appropriate zoological activities, that the majority of handicapped children can live in and contribute to society just like all the others. Educational programmes should give handicapped children a series of creative experiences, and transmit to them the skills that can help them learn effectively about zoology.

If the handicapped child is intellectually gifted, he or she will learn rapidly from each lecture and show dexterity in manual skills. The child does not function with theoretical concepts, for he is a practical being, with his own will. Hence ZOODOM puts all its efforts into tapping the potential of each child. The courses fit within a special plan and they are based on a most important underlying objective, which is the conservation of the natural resources of the country by means of the educational campaign which has been carried out since the opening of the zoo.

The personnel of the Education De-

partment are in charge of these courses. They examine the children's needs, the requirements of society and the different methods used by special primary schools in the country. In each classroom at ZOODOM, it is the teachers and children together who work out what they are going to do, how, and why, even though the final decision belongs to the educational staff. The aims of the zoological educational courses for handicapped children can be summed up as follows: To strengthen the knowledge acquired in previous zoology courses in special schools.

To explain through clear and simple demonstrations the importance to man of wild and domesticated animals.

To explain, with the help of descriptions and illustrations, the differences between animals native to the Dominican Republic and other animals housed at the Parque Zoológico Nacional.

To explain the importance of conservation of natural resources throughout the world and specially in our country.

To show through zoological activities that the majority of handicapped children can live and develop their abilities just like any other children and be just as useful to their country.

To develop special ties of friendship between children and teachers.

To establish close co-ordination with the specialized institutions for handicapped children.

Our methodology

When planning a course we tried to find a place where the children would be outside the public flow of visitors, and at the same time within reach of the educational resources. There was no better location than the children's zoo, which has a kiosk with two large tables and twenty chairs.

What type of methodology would achieve the proposed objectives for the four groups of handicapped children that

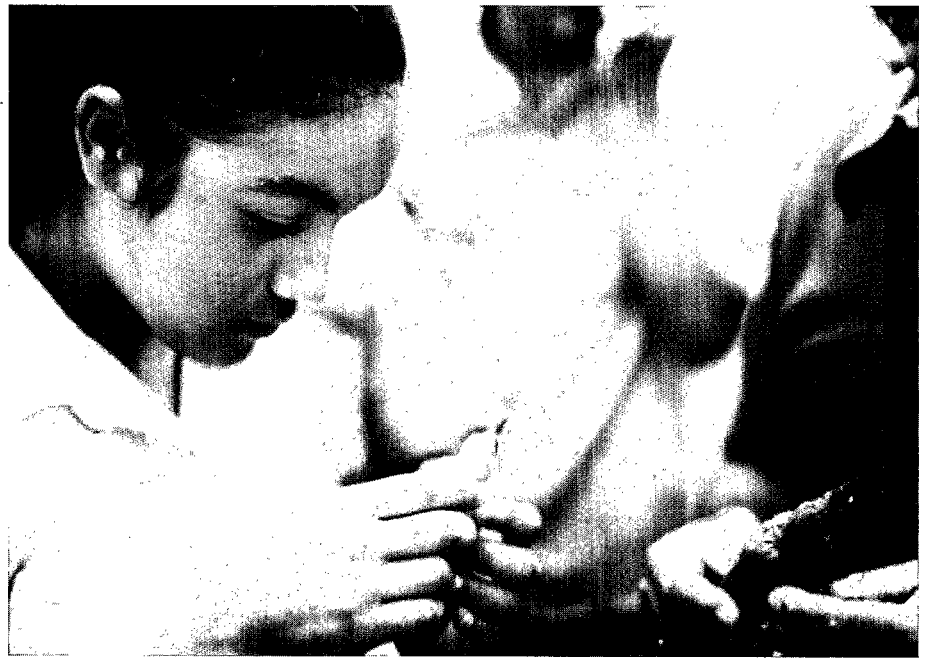
we had defined? We had already used in the classroom, with good results, methods of observation using all the senses and the inductive method of going from particulars to the general, although sometimes, as a final phase, we went from the inductive method to the deductive method of teaching.

One month before the course began direct communication was established between the special schools and ZOODOM. In order to learn the methodology, the ZOODOM teachers visited the special schools. The methods learned include Braille. On the day the courses began, the children were met by the teachers who introduced themselves informally, avoiding the use of formal titles, and explained to the children the kind welcome they would receive at the zoo. After refreshments, the children were taken to the tour train. Each subsequent day a different person took them on the tour so that they could see and hear different things about the zoo and the animals. This change of guides also helped them become acquainted with the different people working at ZOODOM. When the first tour was over, the children were taken to the children's zoo where they began their first lessons.

The topics that we covered successfully included the general characteristics of mammals, birds and reptiles; the skin characteristics of the animals and, finally, animal nutrition. The children always worked with live animals: lion- and tiger-cubs, sheep, horses, rabbits, llamas, tortoises, baby crocodiles, and many different birds. If some of them showed fear, the teacher reassured them, using the example of other children: 'Andrew touched the animal and nothing happened.' 'Do you think I'd show you an animal that would hurt you?' After classroom sessions the children were taken to

1. This article is based on a report on specialized educational programmes at the Parque Zoológico Nacional in 1978/79.

Blind girl examining a bird.
[Photo: ZOODOM.]



Deaf-mute child observing a crocodile replica.
[Photo: ZOODOM.]



PARQUE ZOOLOGICO NACIONAL, Santo Domingo. Deaf-mute children in a relaxed classroom session.
[Photo: ZOODOM.]

Touch reveals the strange forms of the turtle.
[Photo: ZOODOM.]



the zones where the different animals live. When they studied nutrition they were taken to the zoo kitchen where they touched, saw, smelled and even ate the food that was fed to the animals. In these tours the children were also given individualized demonstrations.

Another common activity was making animals with play dough. The blind children, for example, made snakes, four legged animals or turtles. The deaf-mute, retarded, and invalid children enjoyed drawing the animals that they had seen. When they went round the zoo the teachers offered them drawing materials and were always ready to help the children in observing the animals. For example, if a retarded child drew a turtle with nine legs, the teacher explained to

him his error. At the same time the children were encouraged to continue with further drawings.

Special activities offered

The zoological courses were offered for various categories of handicapped children: mentally retarded; physically handicapped; partially or totally blind and those with impaired speech or hearing.

Mentally retarded children. Since some children are more retarded than others, it was necessary to subdivide the group so that the former could be more carefully supervised, depending on their specific needs. Although it is unrealistic to expect the majority of these children to perform

perfectly in their discipline of study or to understand partially or wholly abstract ideas, they can develop certain skills in zoology. The most important part of ZOODOM's work was to teach them to satisfy their immediate cognitive needs. We had to help them adapt to the school and familiarize them with the idea of conservation of natural resources, especially fauna.

Physically handicapped. There were no special activities for these children since their only disability is physical. The most important function of the teacher is to show them that they are still important to society and should not allow their defects to stigmatize them. This was done by means of conversation, anecdotes, and

activities directed by the teacher. At ZOODOM these children helped with our educational campaign, passing on the ecological message against litter to all the children who visited the zoo.

Blind children. The blind child is the easiest to manage, for his only disability is his inability to see. These children think normally, and they learn more easily than those in the other groups. They took all the classes and did all the activities mentioned above except drawing. They were first of all familiarized with the children's zoo and with the teacher's voice. The most important factor should be the area where the class is to be taught, since the child becomes more easily acquainted with this area than any other. When calling on the children from that point, the teacher watched their movements so as to guide them by saying, for example, 'More to the right, a little to the left', until the child had quickly learned where the path was. The children were then asked to mount horses so that they could understand how animals aid man in transportation. The children were lifted on to the horses' backs by a tall person, one of the zoo-keepers, for example, so that they could get an idea of the height of the animals. As a child was being lifted, the teacher might ask: 'Do you understand that not even from there could you touch a giraffe's or elephant's head?' Of course the children could touch a part of an animal's body, and get an idea of its full size.

Blind children participated in all the active games along with the rest. In this way they realized that they could socialize with all the other children who visit the zoo. The latter are usually protective of the blind children, but the zoo teacher intervenes so that the sighted children treat the blind children as equals without pitying them, but certainly showing them extra consideration. In this way the blind children are 'orientated' and helped to realize that they too can function effectively and usefully in society.

Deaf-mute children. These children require much dedication on the part of the zoo teacher since their basic means of learning is the movement of the teacher's lips and the information on the blackboard. The teacher writes all the necessary information on the blackboard, a secondary need in other cases, but indispensable for the deaf-mute child.

Films were shown on animal behaviour: feeding habits, conservation, etc. The teacher wrote on the board what the

deaf-mute children would like to learn. A special demonstration was given for the children and the blackboard used to reinforce the explanations. These children did all the activities already mentioned, including, more specifically, drawings and paintings, cut-outs of felt, etc.

Future activities at ZOODOM for handicapped children

We wish to double the number of courses offered. It is planned also to train one teacher from each special school. We also will be training a blind teacher working with blind children so that he can return with them any day on a special excursion and guide them throughout the zoo. Apart from this, the blind teacher could teach the children better than a sighted colleague, as when he feels something he will probably do so in a similar fashion to the child.

We plan to start a programme called 'Living with your Zoo'. The children who have participated in the four initial courses will take part in this special programme, designed as an occasion to mix, play and enjoy themselves with other children for a whole day at the zoo.

Some suggestions for zoo teachers

Our experience permits us to make the following suggestions, which would apply to other zoo activities with handicapped children and perhaps also to educational work in museums in general:

The special schools for handicapped should be visited by the zoo teacher before the zoo class begins.

Blind children should not be pitied and personal comments should not be made in front of them.

Retarded children should be watched extra carefully at lunch-time and recess, because some of them have difficulty in feeding themselves and others fight with their classmates. These children are the most mischievous and need the most attention.

The special-school teacher should not be present in the zoo classroom; in that way the children will not be inhibited in their actions, or in putting questions, etc. The teacher of retarded children may visit the zoo with them but should not stay in the classroom. He should only be present during lunch-time and recess.

When the children are given their food, it should be brought ten minutes be-

fore lunch-time so that they will not be kept waiting. All the zoo teachers help serve every student and sit and eat with them. The children are left free to socialize with each other, and the teacher should interfere only when there is disorder.

The materials being used should be distributed and collected by only one person, in that way order can be maintained.

After each class a fifteen-minute recess should be given and some refreshments served so that when children return to class they will be rested and content.

During the two-hour lunch and recess period the zoo teacher should organize games and activities, and take part in them. The child will see that the zoo teacher is not only a teacher, but also a friend who will help him learn and develop.

All the zoo teachers should be present and taking part, but there should be one main teacher who co-ordinates and presents the participating teachers to the class. The co-ordinating teacher should always be with the children. It is not necessary that the same teacher always co-ordinate the same group, but a system of rotation should be adopted so that all the teachers will be able to co-ordinate any of the four groups.

At the end of the course there should be a formal occasion at which the children receive certificates from the director of the zoo. All of the personnel of the zoo should be present to enhance the event. There should be some kind of play produced by the co-ordinating teacher and performed by the children. One of the students should give a word of appreciation to the zoo staff on behalf of his classmates; this will give the children a feeling of importance.

The zoo should give the children souvenirs to take home. The souvenirs, along with the refreshments served at the programme should be a surprise for the children.