

Axolotls in the Second Grade

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The first time my second graders saw axolotls they were fascinated and enchanted. Here were exotic animals with a picturesque background, a phonetically unpronounceable name, and which were used for scientific research. They were also ENDANGERED—unlike the many cats, dogs, rabbits, deer, and raccoons of our rural setting in south central Indiana. Endangered species is a current buzz word among all elementary school children.

Working with the immensely helpful staff of the Axolotl Colony at Indiana University, Bloomington, three axolotls (otherwise destined to become snake food) were initially established in an aquarium in my classroom. They were an immediate sensation and word spread quickly throughout our student population of over 1000. This was in May of 1994, and, for the remaining five weeks of school, at least forty to fifty children a morning would come to see the new “fish with legs.” At noon, parents and grandparents were brought to my room, sometimes ten at a time, to see the “creatures.” My second graders quickly became expert “talk show hosts,” and we all practiced the story of their rescue from the polluted lake in Mexico and the research done worldwide on the secrets of limb regeneration to which axolotls hold the key.

Today, in January 1995, the furor has died down, but not the fascination. All three of our animals, an albino, a white, and a “wild,” came to us limbless. We have watched them grow all their limbs back; only one shows any sign of deformity—a slight paralysis in the left rear leg.

The growth in length has been measured regularly and entered on a computer grow chart. Seven-year-olds are just beginning to learn to measure, and we have both metric and English system records. Food is measured daily and recorded, and we attempt to drop it in the same vicinity each time. Considering the diffraction caused by the glass tank and the water, this is a visual perception skill not easily mastered by seven-year-olds.

With a good filtering system we have to clean the tank only about every five weeks. This involves drawing ten gallons of water ahead of time to let the chlorine dissipate. Children are involved in this, as well as emptying the dirty

(and often highly aromatic) water being siphoned off. Small groups work with me at recess on this task. Recently, however, I began the siphoning while the class was working on a math test. A horrified child, returning from the restroom, saw me put the siphon hose in my mouth to start the flow and ran into the room yelling, “Oh, my gosh, you guys! Mrs. Coppedge is drinking the axolotl water!”

In November 1994, our beloved “pink and white” axolotl died. The kids were devastated. I, too, felt like I had killed something truly special to the world. A picture of an axolotl similar to our pet had just been discovered on the cover of Ranger Rick magazine, and it now hangs on the wall beside the tank as a memorial. I knew we needed the I.U. colony staff to help us discover whether our habitat, a disease, or other condition had been responsible: or maybe nature had just simply taken its course. I froze the animal in a sandwich bag in the teacher’s lounge refrigerator until I could take it to Susan Duhon and Sandra Borland at the colony three days later. Meanwhile there were honest emotional issues to deal with. The children dealt with their sadness in myriad ways: creative writing, drawings, a discussion with the counselor, letters to their parents and even the Indianapolis Zoo. The children went about the work of life—and death—just as seriously as any adult, only in their own way. We were relieved to discover that a natural genetic problem was the cause of death. I appreciated Ms. Duhon’s and Ms. Borland’s sensitivity because it was decided the children actually needed a funeral for the animal. And so, with everyone participating, some much more tearfully than others, “Pinkie” was laid to rest under an evergreen tree in our outdoor lab.

This may seem rather unscientific information for a research journal, however I would invite you at any time to stand by and listen to the inquisitive nature of the conversations at the axolotl tank:

“Can they see us, do you think?”

“Why does their food smell so bad?”

“Did you see him breathe?”

“His ‘feelers’ moved. He’s alive all right.” “Not ‘feelers,’ silly. Remember they are gills. The book said.”

“How many were at I.U.?”

“What other colors do they come in?”

“The pink and white one was my favorite, it grinned.”

“Do they have teeth?”

"How much do they weigh?"
"It was slick when I touched it."
"They're too slippery to hold."
"How long do they live?"
"Do you suppose they miss Mexico?"
"Which one is the boy?"
"If they have babies, I'm going to ask
Mrs. Coppedge if I can have one."

We understand that the "right time" is approaching, and our current plans are to remove "Herman" from the tank soon and let his "heart grow fonder." When he returns to "Goldie," our hopes are that reproduction will take place. We still have so much to learn, and we never lose our interest and wonder at our own special axolotls.