

Axolotls in my Third Grade Classroom

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Use the word axolotl around most people, and the response would be, "What are they?" Use the same word around my third graders, and not only would they tell you they are a type of aquatic salamander, but they could explain that they are also an endangered species. Many schools are using curriculums and doing major projects which have environmental themes and deal with many environmental issues. When it comes to discussing endangered species, most schools are only able to show pictures or movies of these animals. There are not many other ways to view these unfortunate creatures, other than a trip to the zoo. However, we are fortunate to have Indiana University and the IU Axolotl Colony near by. Not only are the colony personnel committed to their axolotl research program, but they are also committed to the education of the public as to what their program and these fascinating creatures have to offer.

After the Axolotl Colony at Indiana University donated four axolotls to our classroom, we had a class discussion about the fact that axolotls are used in regeneration research and that they are an endangered species. Before the axolotls, I too was only able to show pictures and movies of animals in danger. However, the students are now able to experience these creatures and truly appreciate their fragile nature in today's world, and make this connection with other endangered species. They are able to understand that it would be a travesty to lose these creatures, both as a species and as something which may well prove to be very important in the medical practices of man. My class does an extensive study of the rain forest. We discuss what a shame it would be if the forests were to disappear and take with them the cures to cancer and other horrible diseases. The axolotls are a concrete example of this notion. They make the connection of human kind's dependence on nature very clear.

The axolotls are one of the first things which catch the eyes of any visitor in our classroom. We have a classroom full of animals. There are snakes, lizards, tarantulas, gerbils, mice, rats, guinea pigs, birds, and fish. As visitors browse around the room, they never fail to stop in front of the axolotl tank and ask, "Wow! What are

these strange looking things?" The next question is "Where can I get some?" The students are very quick to step in and answer their questions and inform them of what they know. The visitors are always amazed.

Desmond Carpenter and Gene Brown, two of my students, were not content with just the things we had discussed in class. They wanted to know more. A few days after we got our axolotls, they began a research project on them to find out as much as they could. They discovered several types of food which are consumed by axolotls, how to sex an axolotls, the names of the lakes where axolotls are found in the wild, the meanings of the word axolotl, and a whole host of other information. The boys completed their research and presented their findings to the class. They also put their presentation on a videotape. The boys even went so far as to ask that if one of our axolotls died, could they have it to dissect. Most people would find this unusual. I found it to be more evidence as to how something like axolotls can aid in helping students to find a love of learning. By the way, they did stress "IF" it died. Finally, the boys were able to experience the Axolotl Colony first hand, thanks to Ms. Susan Duhon. She graciously gave the boys a tour and showed them everything from the colony to an axolotl's heart beating under the microscope.

We are looking forward to the months of January and February when we may try our hand at axolotl reproduction. Our class does a lot of discussion about animal development and growth. We compare bird development with that of small mammal development, by hatching chickens and allowing some of our classroom animals to have babies. If we are successful in getting axolotls to reproduce, we could add amphibian development to our list. We are also planning on hatching snake eggs in the spring. We hope to team with Mrs. Ginny Coppedge's second grade classroom to see if we are able to produce any offspring. How exciting it would be if we were able to produce any offspring. How exciting it would be if we were able to supply axolotls to any classroom who desired them! I believe my classroom contains only female axolotls. Therefore, we may need to depend on Mrs. Coppedge's male axolotl to allow our axolotl to reproduce.

We still have a great deal to learn about axolotls, but I am positive that with the help of the axolotl lab at Indiana University and the continued enthusiasm of the students, we will continue to learn about these fascinating creatures for years to come!