

Our Zoo, Our Community - A successful community zoo partnership.

Claire Doyle, Educator, Dublin Zoo, Ireland.

The after school programme run by Dublin Zoo's Education Department provides young people from an inner city background with opportunities to have specialist zoo experiences. This is achieved through innovative and groundbreaking collaboration between inner city youth services and Dublin Zoo. The programme will encourage young people to become advocates of nature - influencing members of their community to learn about nature, conservation and science. We wish to create and maintain a successful zoo/youth service partnership, which will create rich and rewarding learning resources to entice young people and their youth workers. This project supports youth workers to deliver something unique to a disadvantaged group with best practice teaching and learning through student led investigations in behind the scenes areas - challenging deeper levels of thinking and connecting learning to the community.

The programme is designed as a multidisciplinary approach to integrating key learning areas into a comprehensive educational model with a strong focus on practical learning – a 'hands-on' approach. The programme design utilises the latest best practice teaching innovations such as Project Based Learning (PBL). This style of learning provides complex tasks based on challenging questions or problems that involve the students' problem solving, decision-making, investigative skills and reflection that include teacher facilitation but not direction. They take a problem and apply it to a real situation. Students respond well to PBL because the projects are "*realistic, not school-like*". This gives the students the feeling of authenticity that they prefer with their learning (Thomas J. 2000). It caters for all abilities, talents and learning styles of students.

The goal is to help children make sense of the world in which they live and to see the relevance of nature. The zoo visit will enable children to combine images from television, video and books with real life observations. The aim is to help young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to make the connection with nature and to make informed choices about the world they live in now and in the future.

Background:

Dublin Zoo Education Department has developed a working relationship with inner city youth groups over the last number of years. Since 2006 we have built on the existing after school programme and have now fully integrated the programme into the Education Department's calendar.

We have also built a valuable link for these young people among the keepers and education staff of Dublin Zoo.

The young people involved showed a great deal of interest in animals and the natural world to their youth workers. The groups involved were handpicked based on behaviour and aptitude as well as their creativity – many groups carried out a piece of artistic work as a way of expressing what they learned on their visits to the zoo. Group Profile:

10 -13 yr old mixed groups. Most live in a flat complex in the inner city. Many are at risk of early school leaving.





Main Aims of the After School Programme:

- To build an educational model with a strong focus on practical learning: a hands-on approach specifically aimed at youths from disadvantaged areas.
- To learn about zoo keeping, animals and the natural environment.
- To develop skills and relationships within the group and with staff. A huge part of this programme was the social interaction gained outside their own community – meeting & working with people in a new setting.
- To use elements of creativity throughout the process, culminating in an piece of work.

Outcomes:

- Creativity and skills based learning.
- A positive joint piece of work with an established organisation.
- The positive experience of working with young people outside of their normal everyday environment
- Provided participating youths with knowledge and skills and confidence that would enable them to develop their own independent ideas and initiatives.
- The young people benefited in that their engagement with nature was enhanced. They experienced innovative, enquiry-based lessons through behind the scenes activities.
- Youth workers and young people became engaged in real life and meaningful learning experiences, as well as allowing them to take ownership of their learning – This is the challenge of implementing new science education programmes at the zoo. Youth workers were encouraged to integrate zoo learning back into the traditional learning areas. An equal challenge from a zoo perspective is how we engage students in our work so that a zoo visit is not merely seen as a fun day out but an important and relevant learning experience, supporting vision and mission.

2010 After School Programme Timetable:

Dublin Zoo Education Department offered the After School Programme to three Youth Services in the inner city in 2010: Ballybough Community Youth & Sports Centre; Donore Avenue Youth Service;

and Ringsend & Irishtown Youth Project, Ringsend & Irishtown Community Centre.

The programmes ran seasonally in spring and autumn from 3.30pm to 5pm on a Wednesday or a Friday afternoon depending on the group involved. The **timetable** ran as follows:

- 3.30pm Meet at front gate. Welcome & discussion on the theme of the days programme. Safety briefing for relevant animal area
- 3.45pm Animal encounter - Behind the scenes tour or enrichment workshop
- 4.25pm Guided portion by education team member through the animal enclosure from the visitor side
- 4.45pm Recap the days task – what have we learned about the animal in its natural habitat & in the zoo environment
- 5.00pm Programme finish.

On completion of the 6 week programme the young people involved are given a Dublin Zoo certificate of completion and an education pack. Education staff also host a small 'party' to celebrate the young people's achievements throughout the programme in the last session.

Animal team Involvement:

Cross departmental collaboration has made this programme a huge success. The three team leaders provided fantastic support and commitment to the programme as well as making keepers available to offer behind the scenes encounters as part of the programme. The 2010 programme was the first where animal encounters were offered weekly for the duration of the programme. Strict behind the scenes safety procedures were adhered to. The young people were given a safety briefing on arrival. The behind the scenes portion of the programme was about 30 - 40 minutes in duration.

Conclusion

Creating and maintaining this programme started with gaining the support of the whole zoo. The commitment of various departments across the zoo was essential for the success of this programme. The next crucial element was finding youth workers committed to creating student engagement. By ensuring ongoing engagement, communities are empowered in their belief and ability to make a difference. If continuously supported these partnerships can offer rich, authentic experiences that have a genuine impact on deeper learning and changes in beliefs and attitudes, which could further enhance community action beyond the classroom. A community zoo partnership can achieve ongoing engagement and provide support in disadvantaged areas to mobilise the young people involved to join us in creating a future where humans are more in balance with nature.