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THE CURRENT SITUATION AND ISSUES OF MENTALLY DISABLED CHILDREN'S NATURE EXPERIENCES ACCORDING TO THE QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF PARENTS' QUESTIONNAIRE

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Abstract

Experiences help children develop and foster a zest for living. In particular, experiences in nature during childhood have important effects on children's humanity (Carson, 1956). However, disabled children are extremely limited when it comes to opportunities to experience nature. In Japan, recently, according to the "Act on the Utilization of Funds Related to Dormant Deposits to Promote Public Interest Activities in the Private Sector," projects for eliminating the experience gap have been carried using dormant deposits. Ocean Family (an authorized non-profit organization) has been selected as one of the groups to execute this project, and it has implemented a three-year plan for a seaside experience program for mentally disabled children during summer. We researched the experiential learning of diverse children using a questionnaire and observational studies on the Ocean Family program for a period of three years. The aim of this report was to investigate the current situation and issues of mentally disabled children's nature experiences based on the qualitative analysis of a questionnaire administered to parents after the first year of activities. Results show that parents' hope and expectations for the seaside experience program included "enjoyment" and "sense of wonder." Parents understood that their children enjoyed the program based on their facial expressions and behavior after returning home from the sea. In addition, several types of learning and development were reported by some parents, even though the experiences happened only once or twice, and the activities were held within one hour. Furthermore, some parents were anxious and nervous about taking their children to experience nature by themselves; the major anxiety was related to serious accidents or injuries. Other causes of parental anxiety were encountering situations or materials that their children would dislike or hate, bothering other people on public transportation or in public spaces, and financial costs.

Keywords: Mentally Disabled Children, Nature Experiences, Seaside Experience Program.

1. Introduction

Children's experiences can create a deep impression on them, develop their interest, spur them to question and take action, besides making them try out things by themselves. Experiences are the sources of thoughts and practices and hence are important for creating a better and abundant life. In particular, nature experiences are necessary for children, as it keeps their inborn sense of wonder alive (Carson, 1998) and influences their human nature. However, adverse children and children growing up in difficult environments have limited nature experiences. Therefore, there is a serious experience disparity among children.

According to the “Act on the Utilization of Funds Related to Dormant Deposits to Promote Public Interest Activities in the Private Sector,” (Cabinet Office, 2016) projects for eliminating the experience gap have been carried out in Japan using dormant deposits.

The project deployment is consigned to the private sector; the Blue Sea and Green Land Foundation (B&G) has been selected as the organization for distribution of funds. B&G publicly solicited the services of groups that can offer nature activities like marine leisure for children with disabilities and children from single-parent families or from orphanages, in order to promote their body and soul development and to experience the inclusiveness of society. Ten groups selected from around the country would have subsided for three years, from 2020 to 2022. The approved Specified Nonprofit Corporation, Ocean Family, was one of the selected executing groups that launched the three-year project named “Playing in the sea for all children.” The Ocean Family has offered an ocean nature experience program for mentally challenged children for three years, after which it intends to operationalize the project.

In this study, we will examine the Ocean Family’s project and children attending the program from an academic and pedagogical viewpoint. This research report aims to certify the current situation and issues related to the nature experiences of children with mental disabilities. This will be used as the base of a comprehensive assessment for three-year-long research observation through the administration of a questionnaire to parents who have monitored their children most closely and for the longest period, and thus, know them best.

2. Method

The program was conducted for three days on 12th and 29th August, and 26th September. Participants were children aged 4–17 years, with mental disabilities, from childcare centers. Some children participated in the program for all three days, and others participated for only one day. Each day, about 17 children participated in the study. The total activity time was approximately 90 min. The total time including preparation (wearing swim clothes, sunburn protection, etc.) and after care (bathing, changing clothes, etc.) was about 3 hours. The Ocean Family staff organized activities such as bathing, swimming, floating, watching small living creatures, riding on a body-board (small and light surf-board), kayaking, and so on. Children could perform any activity that they wanted, but along with at least one adult, a care center staff, or a volunteer.

For the research, a qualitative interactive descriptive design was employed through open-ended questionnaires filled in by the parents. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s framework for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We collected the filled-in questionnaires from the parents through the childcare center staff.

The main questions pertained to:

- 1) Children’s age and sex
- 2) Experiences and expectations of the Ocean Nature program before joining it (Free description)
- 3) Children’s appearance and behavior after playing in the sea. (Free description)
- 4) Differences in the children before and after the program (Free description)
- 5) Anxieties of parents about taking their children to the sea.

3. Results

Fourteen parents completed the questionnaires and handed them over to the childcare center staff; thus, the collection rate was 58%. Their children included 17 boys and 7 girls, aged between 4 and 17 years (from question 1).

We categorized the answers based on the framework for thematic analysis and tabulated the results. Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 are the results of questions 2, 3, 4, and 5. Left-side columns are answers categorized by the author and right-side columns denote the number of answers. Some parents used more than one questionnaire for their responses; therefore, the total number of questionnaires exceeded 14 (the number of answer sheets handed out).

Table 1: Expectations before joining the program (question 2)

Enjoyment	6
Nature and living creatures	7
Experiences they have never had before	3
Human relationship, learning and awareness through others	4
Anxieties or worries (more than expectation)	2

Table 2: Children's appearance after participating in the program (question 3)

Parents found that children enjoyed themselves	14
Children spoke about happy memories to the family, wrote them in the diary	3
Cheerful (not tired, even though the child did not have much strength)	1

Table 3: Comparison of children before and after the program (question 4)

Experienced growth and learning	8
Became healthy and gained strength	2
Started to like playing in the sea	2
No difference	4

Table 4: Worries and anxieties of the family about taking children to the sea (questionnaire 5)

Serious accidents, injury, danger	5
Come across things which children hate (crowds, noise, rough unpleasant feeling of sand, etc.)	2
Disturb others (in public space)	2
Difficulty in parking the car near the sea (It was difficult to use public transportation)	1
Parents did not want to go to the sea	3
No worry or anxiety	2

4. Discussion

In the reference research report on normal children's ocean nature experience (Gakken, 2011), almost all parents found that their children enjoyed the experience, similar to the results of our study on children with mental disabilities. Normal children either spoke or wrote about happy memories regarding the program to their families, which was also the case in the present study.

After the nature experience, normal children's parents commented that the 'children began to help parents', 'children began acting with confidence', 'children began to do things by themselves' and 'children became strong'. Individual specific contents were different among children, but the common factors were growth and learning. In addition, children began to like and become interested in nature. In order to develop and maintain a sense of wonder, being fond of nature is necessary for all children. Growth, learning, and developing a fondness for nature after the experience, were common outcomes among our children with mental disabilities as well. Based on the descriptions given in the reference report and our results, we can conclude that nature experiences are effective and necessary for each child's experience, regardless of the presence or absence of disability.

In addition, normal children's parents expected that their children would develop cooperativeness, a sense of responsibility, and discipline through nature experiences. Even preschool children's parents expected the same (Watanabe, Unno, 2013). In contrast, parents of children with mental disabilities expected enjoyment to be the main outcome. A reason for this difference might be that normal children have several opportunities for enjoyment other than nature experiences, but the opportunities for a child with a mental disability to enjoy would be limited; therefore, parents desired enjoyment to be experienced by their children on this rare occasion. Both groups of parents expected their children to achieve doing what they normally could not do, through nature experiences. However, the concept of 'what children could not do normally' might differ between the parents of normal and mentally disabled children. For the former, the achievement would pertain to socialization and being independent. For the latter, it would include playing in the sea without worry or anxiety or playing with a surfboard or a kayak, which their family could not offer and which required support from another person, organization, or society.

Many parents of children with mental disabilities were worried or anxious about taking children to the sea with their families. The reasons were children's hyperactivity, difficulties in self-control, and catching a scent of danger. Some children were hypersensitive and would panic when they came across an uncomfortable stimulation. For these reasons, parents were worried that their children would bother others, or they could be in a dangerous situation. In the Ocean Family program, at least one adult accompanied each child with mental disability throughout the program. For normal children, the buddy system can be used as they can safely check on each other. However, that is not the case for a child with mental disability and hence, support from an adult is required.

As for car parking, not only disabled drivers but also disabled family or friends being driven in the cars need priority parking space. With the understanding and cooperation of the local government or parking facility management office, this problem could be solved, for example, special permission for priority parking could be issued.

Children with mental disabilities were limited to joining nature activities. It would be difficult for a few leading teachers (adults) to assure the security of many children, including those with mental disabilities. However, with an assurance on security, children, with or without disability, can have joyful and fulfilling experiences. Some children showed nervous negative behavior in crowds or sand at first. However, after they understood that a reliable adult was always by their side, they became calm. After becoming aware that beyond the uncomfortable sand, there was a

refreshing sea where they could enjoy marine activities, children comfortably walked on the sand into the sea water. If children are perceptive enough, they show patience and make an effort to combat stress, regardless of whether they are with or without mental disabilities. “Perceptiveness” is the basis of zest of living (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Japan, 2009).

The significance and effects of nature experiences include fostering a zest for living, which is rich in humanity, self-initiative, physical strength, and health. Based on the parents’ viewpoints, we conclude that eliminating the experiences disparity would be necessary for eliminating the educational disparity for fostering a zest for living.

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