

## EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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The National Museum of Art of Romania already has a rich experience regarding educational programmes, especially those for schools and kindergartens, and for families. Since the year 2000, the Education Department has started to organise such programmes, which over the time have developed and improved constantly. As for the programmes for people with special needs, they have been held since 2001, but only at request and with a low frequency. While until 2007 most of the participants were children coming from underprivileged areas, children with behavioural problems, or children with learning difficulties, in 2007 and in 2008 more children with deficiencies started to participate, coming from schools for children with visual impairments and with hearing impairments; there were also 17 adults with different mental health problems (mental deficiency in various degrees, schizophrenia, depression etc.) coming from two foundations, each group (of nine, and eight people respectively) participating in two different educational programmes. Since the beginning of 2009, only children protected by different foundations, children that didn't have any deficiencies, but whose families were unable to financially provide them with the proper education

their intellectual possibilities demanded have participated in these programmes.

Most of the children that participated in NMAR's educational programmes free of charge had mild or moderate handicaps. Even among the children from the schools for children with hearing impairments and with visual impairments, very few of them were deaf and none blind. As a matter of fact, the only people with specific problems who participated in the educational programmes were the seventeen adults mentioned above. Because of this reason, but also due to a certain lack of experience, most of the programmes we discussed so far hadn't been entirely different from the ones dedicated to regular children; in other words, they hadn't been perfectly adapted to the characteristics of each group. Perhaps this is why the programmes dropped in number instead of being more and more attractive.

However, the reasons for this situation are more than one. First of all, until the year 2007 NMAR hadn't had employees in the Education Department with a special training to professionally hold such programmes. Even when two people with a degree in Special Education were hired, they lacked a relevant reference point to conducting such programmes

– a model of good practice, well documented and successful, coming from a museum within the country or from abroad. Secondly, not even in the present the Museum's offer for educational programmes does include differentiated programmes for people with special needs; they practically exist only on demand, people with special needs not being one of the Museum target groups. Finally, simply graduating from a Special Education Faculty is not enough to hold educational programmes for children with deficiencies within a museum: further specialisation is required – the graduate must gain knowledge about the museum's collections, but also about the different types of handicap he or she works with (for example, the graduate should learn the sign language in order to communicate with deaf persons).

Nevertheless, regarding the actual development of the programme of this kind, there are certain things to be done that are essential for it to be successful.

First, the objectives of the programme must be established, according to group's specific. Indeed, there are certain objectives common with the ones for any other educational programme. In the case of the National Museum of Art of Romania, these are the children's familiarisation with art through interdisciplinary activities, giving an alternative to the formal education and highlighting the Museum's collections. Particularly, educational programme's goals are developing the taste and the knowledge for and about

art, developing the capacity for understanding a work of art, of the context in which it was created; on another hand, since an art object has a subject, the educative possibilities extend; the viewer could go beyond understanding it by giving it his/her own interpretation and meaning. There are also even more aims that could be named, even more specific, that are related to the participants gaining/strengthening some of their abilities, regarding their own personality. Also, some other objectives could be added, depending on each topic of discussion or subject of work. While settling the objectives, the participants' real and mental age, their level of personality development and the level of knowledge they reached must all be taken into account. In addition, when working with people with special needs, the specific of their deficiencies must also be considered. The ideal would be that every museum educator that wishes to hold such programmes knew the problems each category of handicap he or she works with; in any case, it is essential for the museum educator to collaborate with the group's coordinator through the entire process of development of an educational programme, since its planning and until after the actual end of the programme, when his/her feedback would be extremely pertinent and valuable. Not all of the objectives mentioned above could be reached with every group; on the other hand, the group itself may have certain expectations, or the group coordinator could have

some framework-objectives of the group's general activity, in which he or she would want to include the ones settled for the museum educational programme. Thus, the objectives of such a programme should be as well adapted to the interests, the requirements, the needs and the characteristics of each group as possible: flexibility is essential in the process of establishing the programme's objectives.

The next step is to decide upon a method of work, by that meaning both the method of communication and the way in which certain activities should be done. NMAR's educational programmes are structured in two parts: they begin with an interactive visit in one of the Museum's galleries/exhibitions, followed by a creative activity in the Museum's studio. Practically, each group chooses a topic (usually from the ones proposed by the Museum, but it can also be a new one the group's coordinator thinks of), depending of the objectives aimed. This topic is one of the links between the interactive visit and the creative activity. Based on it, some works of art are chosen from the display, and the creative activity is guided both by the topic discussed and by the works of art. Coming back to the methods of work, they could be divided into three categories: means for communication, means for facilitating understanding, and work techniques for the practical activity.

Regarding the ways to communicate, these are usually

verbal and nonverbal. We shall speak in this respect of words and language, and of attitudes. The language used must always be comprehensible to every participant and always flexible, in accord with the present situation. On a semantic level, it is useful to verify that certain words are known by the participants, encouraging them to ask when they don't understand something fully. However, there are situations when using spoken words is not enough to transmit a message. Even if you could manage to exchange messages with people with hearing impairments with nothing but words, facial expression and gestures, communicating this way is quite difficult. Of course, children, as well as adults, with hearing impairments or deafness are encouraged to learn to lip read and to speak without hearing themselves (that is, if their speaking organs are intact); but it is harder to learn to communicate this way than learning the sign language, and most of the children and many adults use the latter means of communication. In this situation, it is absolutely necessary for an interpreter to be present at the educational programme for deaf people or with hearing impairments, or, better yet, for the museum educator to know the sign language him/herself and to use it fluently.

Also regarding the ways of communication, there are some things to be said about the verbal communication with blind or visually impaired people. Since eyesight has one of the key roles

in the development of concepts, a blind person's thinking is based more on the concrete than on the abstract. Hence, when communicating with them, one should keep that in mind and adjust one's discourse accordingly (especially if the blind or visually impaired persons are children). A verbal description of the places they are in or within they pass, along with a detailed description of the art objects discussed are absolutely necessary; the description should be spatially and logically organised and it should also be as detailed as possible, when it is necessary. Also, the verbal communication should be completed by bringing things to touch, hear or smell. It is essential that these people feel secure, accepted and encouraged (either tacitly or expressed, depending on the situation).

Moreover, the group's coordinator's interventions are very useful in situations when some problems appear in understanding, or when the discussion touches a domain well known by the participants (the coordinator could remind them about things or experiences they know or have, thus clarifying certain meanings or strengthening certain knowledge). Also, there are situations when a specific activity (talk, game, using illustrative materials etc.) requires two or more people to perform it – cases when the coordinator's active involvement is absolutely necessary.

The museum educator's attitude towards the patrimony, the educational programmes themselves

and also towards the participants during these programmes is essential for the fulfilment of the objectives. In this last respect, his/her attitude should create a playful atmosphere that should also give the children a feeling of trust and safety, of joy and acceptance, without putting aside the fact that everything happens in a museum, and that certain rules of conduct need to be followed. The museum educator's attitude is important because it can mould the children's behaviour, it can stimulate and encourage them when needed, it can become an example of conduct, and it can create an environment in which the child becomes more self-confident, where he/she can try different ways of thinking and learn by playing etc.. In other words, the attitudes shown by the museum educator, more or less consciously, could influence in a good or a bad way the outcomes of the programme. Of great importance in this concern are respect, patience, care, acceptance, valorising the participants, the programmes and the museum, openness towards the participants as distinct personalities and towards new ideas, trust, and joy. Empathy is also important, as it stimulates the development of the relationship, and the personalities of the others.

During an educational programme, some situations may occur when communicating verbally and nonverbally and through the attitude it is not enough for the message to be fully understood. In these cases, the need for using other methods imposes itself: they

can be either games, or alternative materials to better illustrate the subject of discussion. Using games has several advantages: it can break off the monotony, it can focus the attention, it can stimulate the imagination and the creativity, and it can be a great means for active learning. Depending on the group's characteristics, on the topic discussed and on the space available, the museum educator can propose different games, with different lengths in time, simpler or more complex. It is recommended that the museum educator thinks in advance of several games that he or she could play with the participants of a specific group, either planning it as a part of the programme, or having it in store for unexpected events (the group can suddenly no longer concentrate; some members of the group disturb the others by doing something else; the participants' interest in the subject discussed suddenly drops drastically, etc.).

The illustrative materials that can be brought at an educational programme by the museum educator can be images, diagrams, different objects, sounds and scents, texts to be read, short films etc.; they all must be connected to the topic chosen and to the works of art discussed during the programme. They are useful because they offer support to the better understanding of the works of art, thus encouraging the participants to form their own opinion or interpretation on them. These illustrative materials become truly important when working with

blind or visually impaired people. For them, it would be a proper thing to touch some of the works on display; however, even if this is possible or not, the museum educator could bring them relief representations of the works discussed, relief diagrams of the main elements of composition (in the case of discussing a painting), some tools or materials used in the making of a specific work of art etc.. All the same, using illustrative materials incites to curiosity, enthusiasm, involvement and participation, and it encourages the participants to express their own opinion.

Regarding the practical activity, when choosing a certain technique it is recommended to keep in mind the objectives established, the group's characteristics and its demands, the topic chosen and the works discussed during the interactive visit. In this process, the collaboration with the group coordinator, or even with the participants themselves, is very useful. It is extremely important that the museum educator knows what the members of the group physically able to do. Asking a person with deficiencies to do something he or she cannot accomplish practically equates with slighting him/her. Depending on each group and on its characteristics, the chosen technique should bring on satisfaction – the participants should have the physical possibility, as well as the time and materials needed to realise a work which they could be proud of.

Once the technique of work and the subject of the creative activity have been settled, at the beginning of the practical activity it is useful to let the participants know what materials they can use and, depending on the situation, how to use them and how they are distributed. The subject chosen is best to affectively involve the participants (it should refer to their feelings, their preferences, their life experience, and so on), in order to encourage self-expression and self-awareness. At the end of the activity, if time and the participants' mood permit it, it would be worth for the participants to share with the group their opinions and feelings about their own works of art, not by coercing them, but only by encouraging them to do so. Thus, the creative activity becomes an enjoyable experience, while also strengthening and clarifying the knowledge gained during the interactive visit, linking that knowledge with the participants' own life experiences, and encouraging self-expression and confidence (in themselves and in others).

During the creative activity, it is best that the museum educator is available for any assistance required by the participants, and that he or she shows interest in the work of each member of the group, without directly influencing their outcomes. In this way, the museum educator supports the participants to freely express themselves and to search for their own way to accomplish something (which implies awareness and choice assuming). Comments like "this way is not good", or

"your drawing is bad", or "this is the most beautiful work", coming from either the museum educator or from the group members, are under any circumstances unacceptable and they must be discouraged. Each work created by the participants is important, significant and beautiful, and the museum educator should point out the specific qualities of the works that sustain these affirmations. In this context, talent is not relevant; instead, the participants learn to respect each other and to recognise in others and in themselves valuable things. This is even more important for people with special needs, since they do not come across this kind of attitude on a daily basis. The educational programmes for people with special needs should better resemble to a form of therapy than to a learning method, and they should involve as many facets of the participants' personalities as possible, referring to their abilities, their feelings, their emotions and their experiences. Thus, an educational programme of this kind should fit in the larger educational and therapeutic programme they are already a part of.

After the actual programme has finished, the collaboration with the group coordinator is again required, in order to analyse its results and to improve it if necessary. After all, the only ones qualified to say if a programme has been successful or not are the participants themselves or the person caring for them, by observing differences in their behaviour, in their attitude or in their abilities.

Returning to the educational programmes for people with special needs held so far at the National Museum of Art of Romania, we have already said that they haven't been very successful due to an insufficient adaptability towards the needs of the target group. But neither us (the museum's staff qualified on education), nor they (the people with special needs and the persons that take care of them) had an accurate representation of such a programme: we didn't have a good example from which to begin, and they didn't have well defined expectation towards such a programme. Another reason for the above mentioned insufficient adaptability might also be the fact that most of the participants were actually very close to people with all their senses and abilities intact and fully functioning, thus requiring few amendments to the regular programmes we held. Moreover, on the one hand, the programmes for people with special needs are not enough promoted, and on the other, people with different impairments living in Romania tend not to be very visible, as the public is not truly accepting them, and thus they participate in relatively few events attended mostly by unimpaired people. Promoting the educational programmes and being persistent in holding them on a regular basis is one of the things that can be done to improve this situation.

As a conclusion, besides the things said so far, it could also be added that there are three or even four stages of developing

educational programmes for people with special needs. The first one would consist of programmes held by museum educators without a special qualification to work with such people, programmes that therefore are very similar with the usual programmes, with only slight changes towards adaptation (for example, when holding an educational programme for visually impaired children, Angelica Iacob obtained approval for them to touch a certain sculpture, using gloves, because she was aware of the importance that touch has for them). A second stage of development would mean programmes held by museum educators with special education studies – more adapted programmes, but that still are not fully adapted due to a lack of further specialisation (as is, for example, learning the sign language for communicating with hearing impaired people). A third stage would consist of programmes held by museum educators that have also trained in different fields, in order to better cope with the tasks implied by an educational programme of this kind. Without a doubt, this would be the best and the most successful option. Finally, a fourth stage (but that could also be concurrent with the other stages) would be represented by programmes held by people qualified to work with each category of handicap, that work part-time for the museum, and who have also gained knowledge about the museum's patrimony and educational programmes.

These being said, holding

successful educational programmes for people with special needs is neither impossible, nor very distant from our present possibilities. All

that we need in order to achieve this is motivation, determination, and of course, the joy to participate in the process of their making.

