Special Children, Special Teachers: Blending Humane Education with Special Education

by Patty Finch

- Proudly, the class stands at the Town Hall ceremony. The students are presenting a copy of the four-page flyer they developed on how to find a missing pet.
- Two children sit huddled over their papers busily writing. They are developing articles to send to the Finnish Humane Society children's newsletter in Helsinki, Finland.
- Last year, a boy's sole interest in animals was "squishing bugs." Recently, at recess, he was overheard explaining to other children how to replace worms in their natural environment.
- Two students, thanks to classroom lessons and experiences, were able to obtain summer positions as veterinary assistants.

These are special children. They've been made fun of by the neighborhood kids. They've failed repeatedly in school. Sometimes they'd rather be thought of as "bad" than "dumb," so they act accordingly. These are special education students. Luckily, they have very special teachers—teachers who have made humane education an integral part of their curriculum.

An Agent for Change

Kathie Pontikes, a doctoral candidate, is in her sixth year of teaching learning-disabled/behavior-disordered children. Her students range in age from seven to ten years. Kathie team teaches with Ken Solomon so that students may experience a more normal class size while benefiting from lots of teacher-student interaction. Kathie sees humane education as a natural for all children but especially appealing to her students at The Miriam School in Webster Groves, Missouri.

"These kids have been the underdogs all their lives. They can relate to animals who are threatened with extinction," observes Kathie. "They know what it's like to be misunderstood and devalued. The suffering of animals gives these kids a cause. For once, the children can be giving help instead of receiving it. That boosts their self-confidence and helps animals."

Humane education is a natural not only for the children but for Kathie as well. A member of numerous local and national animal welfare groups, she is a presenter for the local speaker's bureau concerned with treatment of animals. Kathie explains, "At first, when I began teaching a humane lesson in my classroom every week, people thought, 'Oh, that's just her. That's her personal crusade.' The other teachers didn't see themselves getting involved at all." Kathie, however, always invited other classes to join hers for special events. When personnel from a local raptor sanctuary brought a golden eagle and barn owl to her class, all the other classes were there as well. Now, out of the nine other teachers at the school, four have followed Kathie's example of adding a classroom pet, and all use some portion of the humane education materials.

"The teachers saw it was not just my crusade, but a neat way to teach respect for all life," Kathie explains. "I don't just teach about animals but about what's happening to animals. For example, I bring in a steel-jaw leghold trap for the kids to examine. They become very vocal about protecting animals' rights, even if it's a small beetle or worm. Two of my students even wrote articles for a humane society newsletter in Finland. I really feel that these children will have an impact upon our world as they come into adulthood. They are future crusaders in a very important cause."

Opening New Worlds

Mary Thomas is a teacher of educable mentally retarded children at the Skills Center in North Little Rock, Arkansas.
She teaches a four-week unit for eighth- and ninth-grade students who rotate through classroom responsibilities every fourth day. She spends half a day in Mary's class. The rest of the day is spent at her home base, providing support for special education students as a job station.

Mary's classroom responsibility is to provide education for special education students. Each classroom is adapted to the unique needs of the students in their daily living environment. Mary teaches a four-week unit for eighth-grade students who rotate through classroom responsibilities every fourth day. She spends half a day in Mary's class. The rest of the day is spent at her home base, providing support for special education students as a job station.

Diane Wiet teaches primary level students. She believes that the best way to teach is through play. She uses games and songs to help students understand and retain new information. Diane is often referred to as a "regular division" (non-special education) classroom teacher. She enjoys teaching in a classroom setting and feels that it is the most effective way to reach all students.

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Humane Actions, Humane Attitudes

"The students' awareness of animals has really changed," remarks Diane. "I've seen a real change in the way they interact with the animals. They are less afraid and more respectful of them." Diane attributes this change to the fact that students are able to spend more time with the animals and observe their behavior. She also credits the success of the program to the support of the school administration and the community. The school principal and the board of education have been instrumental in providing the necessary resources and support to make the program a success.

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of change in her students. "The children's growth just from September to May is incredible. They take the issues about animals to heart. This caring extends to even the smallest of creatures. It was one of Kathie's students who was upset one day at recess because the playground was being sprayed to exterminate bees. As he explained to a teacher, "The bees worked hard to make what they had, and now they're all going to die." Prior to Kathie's class, this student's only interest in insects was killing and collecting them!

These kinds of changes in student attitudes are the result not only of formal lessons but of teacher example as well. Kathie remarks, "What I do as far as respecting life is something they can incorporate into their own lives."

Mary Thomas recalls she found it hard at first to believe that her tough-talking boys were baby talking to the classroom birds, openly showing their affection for these pets. "I mean, these are t-o-u-g-h kids," Mary emphasizes. She has also seen her humane lessons produce a growing awareness in students. For example, one girl noticed that the guinea pig's fur felt just like her friend's coat and demanded an explanation. Mary, prepared to tackle any topic, told her the facts about furs.

**Side Benefits**

When humane education is incorporated into the special education classroom, the side benefits can sometimes be just as rewarding to witness as the changes in attitudes toward animals. "The development of interpersonal skills is so heartwarming," says Diane Wiet. In using the CHERISH program, Diane has found that when regular division students work on humane lessons with her special education students, some of the stigma attached to being special ed is lost. The attitudes not only of the regular division students but of their teachers as well seem to change. "We become accepted," states Diane, "and not thought of as a different kind of class."

Kathie Pontikes is a firm believer that students learn to be kind to people as they learn to be kind to animals. "They learn to respect life, no matter whose life it is," she observes. Kathie sees this as especially important for her students who have short fuses and limited coping skills.

In addition, Kathie also sees humane education as helping her students with expression of feelings. "When I ask 'How do you feel when a pet dies?' I'm not just teaching a pet unit," Kathie explains, "but rather coping skills for life."

Humane education can also help in the development of motor skills. For some children in Kathie's room, being able to get the litter box out of Brunie's rabbit hutch is a challenge. Brunie also enhances the children's self-help skills by indirectly reminding students to keep track of their pencils, erasers, and crayons. If any of these land on the floor, Brunie is right there ready to chomp away. Her particular favorite is red crayons. Brunie further earns her keep by pulling on and untying shoelaces, which results in extra tying practice!

Parents are now coming to Kathie and asking about the benefits of pets in the home. Kathie, in giving a presentation at one of the school's weekly parent association meetings, emphasized that a child's special needs can cause stress in the family. When this happens, a pet could represent security to the child, someone who will joyfully greet him or her, no matter what. After listening to Kathie's presentation, three parents added pets to their homes.

Mary Thomas has noticed increased student interest in school since she began teaching her animal care unit with pets in the classroom. "Students who never took an interest in anything, now beat me to school in the morning," she points out.

The chance to interact with animals also makes Mary's after school pet club a success. Mary uses the club as another vehicle for humane education. With field trips to the zoo and pet shops, her club quickly became an overnight hit, with participation zooming from 30 to 111!

**Special Needs and Humane Values**

Can humane education provide a successful focus for special education? The answer is a resounding yes, according to Kathie, Mary, and Diane. Their efforts to help special education students through teaching about animals have provided numerous benefits all around.

For further information on these teachers' programs, contact the teachers directly.

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**Editor's Note:** Since this article was written, Brunie the rabbit has passed away. She died quietly in her sleep at the beginning of this year. We'd like to extend our sympathy to Kathie Pontikes, her students, and all who befriended Brunie.

**About the author...** Patty Finch directs a Pet Grief Hot Line in Reno, Nevada, and develops humane education materials.