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 a 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 the classroom. Each classroom period is one hour and a half long, and she spends half a day in Mary’s class. The rest of the day is spent at her home base as a computer lab assistant. Mary’s experience at the Skills Center is referred to as a job station and students learn skills there for future careers. Mary focuses on helping students learn plant life and care; ceramics and pottery; and animal care.

Bringing a classroom animal to the regular school curriculum, while using humane education lessons as the vehicle, is a unique teaching method for Mary Thomas. “The principals didn’t understand the potential of humane education,” she remarks. “All they thought was that you had to read and write of animals. ‘You write about animals,’ they’d say. ‘How is that different from a regular classroom?’”

Mary’s classroom responsibility is to provide education for students in special education classrooms. “The CHERISH program is referred to as a job station and students learn skills there for future careers. Mary focuses on helping students learn plant life and care; ceramics and pottery; and animal care. Mary has two main goals in teaching humane education. One is to help the students learn work skills and the ability to cooperate with each other. The other is to convey humane attitudes to her students. “I plant seeds,” says Mary, “not only about animal care but also about current issues such as protecting endangered animals and trapping. For Mary, an active member of the Arkansas Humane Association, humane education is very rewarding both personally and professionally. “Just love to come to work,” observes Mary. “I feel as if I’ve reached some pretty unreachable kids, and that means so much, doesn’t it? My supervisor said she is thrilled with me, but it’s not just that. She wants a pet in the classroom. Of course, humane education is not simply a pet in the classroom. Fortunately, at the Skills Center, Mary found everyone receptive to the “animal careers job station.” Even the janitor now buffs the floors with Mary’s classroom cockatiel perched on his shoulder! To Mary, it seemed especially important to bring humane education to the students in her current situation. She explains, “Most of my students live in federal housing projects in single-parent families. Pets are not allowed in the projects, and pet food can’t be purchased with food stamps. Many of my students have never been exposed to anything to love.

But, of course, humane education is not always easy to adapt curriculum materials to provide such experiences. But with a classroom pet, no adaptation is necessary. Animals can provide an opportunity for students not only to read and write about a subject but to see, touch, and smell it as well. Mary explains, “So I take credit for nothing.”

Brunie is the class’s hamster, and the students were allowed to help take care of him. He was a “regular division” (non-special-education) student, and three other teachers sat down to write the CHERISH—Children Learning Through Humane Education—curriculum. “The CHERISH index to look up the skill she wants to teach. The index directs her to an activity that teaches not only the skills but responsible treatment of animals as well. After witnessing the results of the CHERISH program, Diane comments, “It isn’t enough just to know how to treat animals. The class must discuss what happened to the animal and what should be done. The students must make up a plan of action to prevent a similar incident from happening again.”

Adaptations for Special Needs

Unique needs exist in any special education classroom. Mary Thomas’s students are primarily nonreaders and accustomed to failure. Mary adds, “They don’t like to write or do paperwork, and they have a negative attitude toward school. With this in mind, Mary, much like Diane, wrote her own curriculum guide, with an emphasis on humane education and writing.”

Humane Actions, Humane Attitudes

Mary Thomas concludes that “the students’ awareness of animals has really changed,” remarks Diane. “Now when they see a lost dog they say, ‘Let’s take it to the animal shelter.’”

Humane education can thrive in a classroom setting, and the CHERISH program is an outstanding example of a high-quality humane program with no pets. Because of established policies, Diane is not allowed to have any animals permanently in the classroom. Field trips to the Brookfield Zoo and the Willowbrook Wildlife Haven have provided students with some contact with animals. But with or without those kinds of outside experiences, humane education can thrive in a classroom without pets. The program and students produced by Diane’s class is an excellent example of that.
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 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!

**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

**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.**