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 different career classes. She spends half a day in Mary's class. The rest of the day is spent at their home base, which is the factory, where Mary's class is a job experience in the community.

Mary's classroom responsibility is to provide education that will prepare the kids for life after high school. The classroom is referred to as a job station and students learn skills there for future careers. Mary focuses on the five Cs: communication, plant life and care; ceramics and pottery; and animal care.

Bringing a classroom animal care unit had been a long-standing goal for Mary. For seven years in various schools, Mary had tried to introduce humane education.

"The principals didn't understand the potential of humane education," she remarks. "But, 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 bathes 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.

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 pets and abuse, the class considers the matter and, thus far, has always decided to take away the privilege from the offender. The offender can earn back the privilege, usually by helping Brunie in some way—by noticing that the classroom door is open and should be shut before Brunie is let out of her harness. Brunie is now six years old. To prepare the children for possible pet loss, Kate has been reading books to the class about the accident as The Accident by Carol Carrick and Mist and Brad by Charlotte Graeber.

Mary Thomas's classroom, the subject of death has already been dealt with. Mary's classroom pets include a cockatiel, a parakeet, a guinea pig, fish, and a turtle with three legs. For a while, the classroom also had a visiting pet, a cat who was recuperating from an operation. It was the cat that taught the class a lesson about accidental death when it killed the classroom parakeet, Arthona.

One morning, the cat was asleep in her box under the bird cage. It was still early, so the class had not begun and Mary was not in the room. The students let the birds out of their cages after first making sure the classroom doors and windows were all closed. As the Antwons (students' spelling for Antone)first enjoyed some exercise, and then flew back to his cage as usual, but left the door open. He landed right in the cat's box. The cat awakened and instantly killed the bird.

In facing the death, Mary had to deal not only with the children's grief but with her own grief as well. "I fell apart," she explains. "The class discussed the incident and the meaning of the term instinct. Finally, the children wrote a story about the accident, which helped them recover from their grief. A funeral was held as well. Nonetheless, the loss was deeply felt, even beyond the classroom.

Two days later, the janitor walked into the classroom with a baby parakeet he had purchased for Mary and the students.

It's obvious that the pets in Mary's classroom are not just for entertainment, therapy, or to create a nice atmosphere. Besides being valued as individual animals with intrinsic worth, the pets also play a major role in Mary's humane education program.

Classroom pets, however, are not needed to teach humane education effectively. Diane's classroom 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 flyer on lost pets produced by Diane's class is an excellent proof of this.

Diane Wiet's students show their Lost Your Pet flyer in their principal's office. The flyer was distributed to each of the public schools in Cicero, Illinois, where Diane teaches.
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 respect 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.