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Increasing Student Engagement through Animal Welfare Education and Service

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Academic success is something each parent and educator wishes for the students in their lives. In the current realm of educational reform what does academic success mean and how can we inspire increased student engagement? Academic success is obviously more than an IQ number or combination of test scores, true academic success is better defined as the drive to master a topic or field of expertise and a desire to continue learning to advance personal understanding or performance (Newman, Wehlage, Lamborn, 1992). Engaged learning involves a psychological investment and reaches beyond task completion. In fact, noteworthy research indicates that students spend much of their educational time and drive executing routines and formalities without developing fundamental understanding (Eckert, 1989; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985; Sedlak, Wheeler, Pullin, &Cusick, 1986; & Weis, 1990).

Student engagement is for the most part driven by three factors, "underlying need for competence, the extent to which students experience membership in the school, and the authenticity" of the task they are given (Newman, Wehlage, Lamborn, 1992, p. 17). Animal welfare education and correlated service-learning can address all three of these factors. In addition, for the many students who have traditionally written-off school and school sponsored functions, personal and authentic learning can assist in rebuilding trust in the educational system (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). Authentic learning built around animal welfare education and animal welfare topics that impact the real world or personal neighborhoods of students encourages brain growth and increased competencies in areas such as kinesthetic, spatial, artistic, and interpersonal in a way that traditional didactic and educator-centered learning does not (Gardener, 2011; Jensen, 2005).

Learner interest in animals and animal welfare issues, while it varies some based upon distinguishing student factors that include age or grade level, gender, and residential location such as urban versus rural, is reported by both students and teachers alike to be high (Kellert, 1984; Itle-Clark,

2013). Utilization of a high interest topic provides traditional pedagogy a set of teeth that supports active engagement and builds the foundation for increased engagement and success (McLeran, 2006). With this in mind, how can education begin to incorporate animal welfare and humane education into the traditional curriculum to create humane pedagogy which "provides students with the opportunity to practice new feelings, attitudes, and behaviors and receive positive reinforcement"–thus increased engagement (Itle-Clark, 2011)? The answer can be as simple as the development of curriculums and learning activities that include not only cognitive components, but also affective modules (Smith & Ragan, 1999). Creation of service-learning projects or other balanced education provides academic instruction as well as skills related to becoming "responsible adults" (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2007).

Infused curriculums, those which meet educational requirements as well as introduce animal welfare themes, are a simple way for any educator to begin. In example, most middle level scope and sequence charts require persuasive letters. Instead of asking students to write a letter about a fictional item, students can connect to their community and address a real-life issue. Students can learn about local shelters and the many adoptable pets who come through their doors and then write a letter to the editor asking the community to adopt or even a letter to local pet stores asking them to support shelters by having only adoptable animals in their stores versus those purchased from possible puppy mills.

Another item that falls in line with the Common Core Standards is to introduce statistics and correlations through work with the city hall or township to obtain records of licensed companion animals and then to map the percentages based upon geographic region. Students can find out how licensing benefits companion animals, if the agency has any targeted marketing campaigns to increase licensing, and correlate which campaigns are working based on the data.

Literature and storytelling have long been supported as one of the best ways to support prosocial and empathic development (Clare, Gallimore, & Patthey-Chavez, 1996; Hochstetler, 2006;

Narvaez, 2008; Tirrell, 1990). This strategy can not only help teachers embrace reading across the curriculum, but also can be a way to introduce students to the plethora of animal welfare issues and inspire youth-voice and action. Realistic fiction such as the classic *Charlotte's Web* provides an entrance into deeper learning about farm animal protection issues. Higher-order thinking questions, those that start with how, why, and would, support discussion that move beyond rote responses and build natural pathways to discuss the differences between humane and sustainable farming methods and concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFO's). These simple additions to the curriculum can provide a student with inspiration to visit a local farm and ask his or her family to financially support community members through purchase of free-range and organic eggs.

Educators who have already incorporated animal welfare into their pedagogical practice and who are ready to commit to a full service-learning project can create an interdisciplinary curriculum that allows for all areas of intelligence to be engaged and connected to real-world issues (Gardner, 2011). This cycle, beginning with identifying academic goals and evaluating an animal welfare need in the community, help students develop ownership of both the academics and the planned service. Utilization of the service-learning cycle by classroom practitioners supports the belief that moral development can be an additional goal of pedagogy and support character development (Hatcher, 1997; Kohlberg, 1971; Kohlberg, Higgins & Power, 1989; Rest & Narvaez, 1991).

In many cases the inspiration for a lesson or project will be brought to the classroom by the students who hear about a local cruelty case or who adopt a pet. Utilize this natural avenue to increase engagement and build competence, school and community membership, and task authenticity (Newman, Wehlage, Lamborn, 1992). Learn more about humane and animal welfare education through the Association of Professional Humane Educators (aphe.org) and find lesson plan and service-learning ideas on The Humane Society of the United States Parents and Educators webpage (humanesociety.org/parents_educators). Educators who want to harness the power of humane

education can even earn a Certified Humane Education Specialist credential from Humane Society

Academy (humanesociety.org/academy).

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