

What Can Humane Education Research Do for You?

by Vanessa Malcarne

As concerned educators, we are constantly searching for the most effective tools and techniques to use in our classes, programs, and presentations. We seek the most exciting materials and innovative approaches to enhance our interactions with the children we teach. Certain, essential questions are always with us: What are the best ways in which we can teach children to think and act humanely? Is my approach the most effective one? How can I make the best use of my time with the children? What could I be doing differently?

Sources of Feedback

Determining the answers to these questions is particularly important to the humane educator with limited time and resources. If we wish to be optimally effective with our precious time and money, we must take a critical look at our own approach? and those of others? to determine how we can best reach the children we teach with our message of humane thought and action. Our first source for information about the effectiveness of our educational programs is readily available: ourselves. Our own judgments and feelings about what takes place between us and the children we teach can prove invaluable in making a critical appraisal of our approach. Our own hunches about how positive or negative the experience was for the children and for us—can provide us with valuable insights into our teaching performance.

A second important source for critical feedback can be found in the children we teach. We must watch them closely; observe their reactions to us and to the message and materials we present. Nothing is more indicative of a failed interaction than a group of unenthusiastic students. For those of us who visit classrooms, another important and more traditional source for evaluation is the classroom teacher. The teacher is generally an expert on interpreting the responses of the students in his or her class and can often give us excellent pointers and feedback on methods and materials that would enrich our time with the students.

The feedback sources mentioned above share one common characteristic: they are *subjective*. This can prove to be both an asset and a

liability. While subjective observation and evaluation can yield incredibly perceptive insights, there is often the problem of sources failing to offer much in the way of negative criticism. Feeling or hearing that our interaction with the children was wonderful does provide us with one valid and useful form of evaluation, but it is also important to be able to have some sort of concrete evidence that what we are doing in the time we spend with the children is having some measurable effect. This is where *objective* evaluative sources come into play.

Objective evaluation of a specific program or personal approach can range from the very simple (for example, giving students a test of the material we've covered in our lesson) to the very complex, involving intricate measures, statistical analysis, and so forth. Some humane educators now use pretests and/or posttests to measure changes in children's knowledge or attitudes about animals as the result of the educational experience. Classroom teachers traditionally view test scores not only as a measure of student progress or achievement but also as a measure of the effectiveness of their particular lessons. More rigorous and controlled evaluation was used by Vockell and Hodal (1980) and Fitzgerald (1981) in their research projects to evaluate the effects of specific types of humane education programming on impacting students' attitudes. (Summaries of these two studies were carried in the June 1980 and September 1981 issues of HUMANEDUCATION.) This type of objective research can be very helpful to humane educators in evaluating their own progress. However, the studies focus on *specific* humane education programs, and the results can't be generalized to programs that employ different approaches or, as Fitzgerald concluded, even the same approach with different teachers.

Another source of input for humane education programming? and one that provides results that may be generalized? is research that evaluates the common techniques or teaching principles employed in humane education programs rather than the effects of the individual programs. The primary reason for any evaluation or research is to use the feedback to plan future programs. If we can demonstrate that certain teaching techniques are effective in positively influencing children's

attitudes or behavior toward animals, this information can be used as a base for planning or supporting any humane education program.

The Stanford Study

Research I conducted while at Stanford University in California this past spring attempted to take a look at some general principles pertinent to humane education. Role-playing has long been established as a valuable and successful technique for increasing empathy (the ability to experience another's point of view) between children. Accepting the positive impact of role-playing on children's empathy as a given, I designed my study with two questions in mind: (1) Would role-playing animals help children increase their empathy with animals? (2) Would increased empathy with animals lead to increased empathy with children; or conversely, would increased empathy with children lead to increased empathy with animals?

My reason for asking the first question was simple: Role-playing has already been shown in other studies to be effective in increasing children's empathy with other children. I wanted to look more specifically at whether role-playing would also help children empathize with animals. If it would, humane educators could feel confident in using role-playing as a teaching strategy for humane education.

The second question was aimed at examining the contention that people who are kind to animals are kind to people. This may seem self-evident to many of us, but it is not? and there are many examples that would suggest that the contrary may be more justified. This is not to say that the contention is false; it is only to say that we should examine it more carefully to see if it is indeed true. The second part of my study tried to do just that? take a look at whether children experiencing empathy with animals or children experiencing empathy with other children would be more likely to generalize that empathy to include others (human and nonhuman).

The design of my study was fairly simple. I spent an hour-long, one-on-one session with each of approximately forty ten-year-

old children. During the hour-long sessions, one-third of the children (Group 1) role-played the parts of children that were hurt, lonely, or victims of distress in some way; another third of the children (Group 2) role-played the parts of animals that were victims of distress; and the last group (Group 3) simply read a story about children and animals in which neither the children nor the animals were in any discomfort. (This third group was the control group.) I let the children use puppets to facilitate their role-playing.

Prior to the sessions, I had prepared two sets of evaluation packets. Both contained four story-starter situations and a questionnaire. Two of the story-starters were the same in both Packet I and Packet 11. One was adapted from Vockall and Hodal's "Johnny and the Fireman" measure and asked the children to select three items from a list of ten to be saved from a burning house. Three of the items that could be selected were a pet dog, a pet cat, and a pet bird. The second story-starter that appeared in both packets was neutral and did not mention a child or an animal in trouble. The other two story-starters in Packet I involved an animal that was in trouble and needed help; the last two story-starters in Packet 11 involved a comparable story about a child in trouble who needed help. Packet I contained a questionnaire that asked the child whether or not he/she would be willing to volunteer time at an animal shelter. Packet 11 contained a similar questionnaire that asked the child if he/she would be willing to help at a center for lonely children.

After each session, I administered to the child the series of four story-starters and the questionnaire from one of the packets. Half of the children in each group received Packet I. and half received Packet II.

I wanted to see if children who had role-played children would demonstrate, through their story completions and answers to the questionnaire, a greater willingness to help children; and children who had role-played animals would similarly demonstrate a greater willingness to help animals. The reason that half the children who had role-played children completed stories and questionnaires involving animals and half the children who had role-played animals completed stories and questionnaires involving children was to help

indicate which group, if either, would show more generalization of empathy. For example, if the children who had role-played animals demonstrated through their completed stories and answers an increased willingness to help both animals and children (as compared to the control group), this would suggest that the children had generalized their empathy with animals to include other children as well.

Project Findings

What did I find? Let's look at the first question. Generally, the role-playing was as effective as I had expected. Children who had role-played children were more willing to help children in trouble as evidenced by their completions of the stories and their answers on the questionnaire. The same was true of children who had role-played animals: They were more willing than the control group, who had done no role-playing at all, to help animals in need. These results, as I mentioned above, were not unexpected. Many studies have shown role-playing to be a very effective means of increasing empathy, and many other studies have shown a casual link between increased empathy and increased willingness to help someone or something in trouble. My study simply demonstrated that this could be applied to building empathy with animals as well as with humans.

Now, the second question: Do children who experience increased empathy with children extend that empathy to include animals? Or do children who experience increased empathy with animals extend that empathy to include other children? In other words, does empathy generalize from children to animals, or from animals to children, or both? My research findings suggest that it does not. While I found that children who had role-played children were more willing to help children and children who had role-played animals were more willing to help animals, my results did not indicate that there was any generalization. The children had been induced to empathize with animals showed little tendency to extend that increased empathy to children, at least as demonstrated by their story completions

and their answers on the questionnaire. This finding does not disprove the contention that animal lovers are people lovers as well, but it does suggest that it would do us well to take a harder look before accepting it as fact and using it as evidence for our programs.

This last finding, even though it does not show promise for a causal connection between caring for animals and caring for people, should not be taken to suggest that all our efforts are in vain. Keep in mind that even if the children in my study did not generalize their empathic feelings, they still experienced increased empathy and exhibited increased helping behavior toward those they had role-played. Our goal in humane education is to enhance children's positive attitudes toward all living things, and this study indicates that role-playing is at least one technique we can use to accomplish that goal. Certainly, finding that these children also show a tendency to help other children as well as animals would be a welcome discovery, but it is not a necessary one.

More Research Needed

My study could be considered preliminary research. It was limited by such constraints as money, time and a small sample size. But it does provide us with suggestions for where researchers might look next. Perhaps we could find a generalization of empathy. Perhaps having children role-play over a more extended period of time would yield such results. (Remember, the children I worked with showed change after an intensive one-hour session. Imagine what ten hours might do!) There are many more approaches that need to be tried and studied, all of which could help us identify the most effective ways in which to help the children we work with develop the humane attitudes we believe in. If we approach research with an open attitude and use it in relation to our needs, such as improvement of our teaching and educational interactions, we may find ourselves on the road to more effective humane education. And that is what we're really looking for.