

HUMANE EDUCATION – BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract. Based on theoretical studies and content analysis of existing scientific literature and humane educational resources, this paper makes an attempt at defining the concept of humane education, briefly describing its historical development and emphasizing its benefits. The advantages of incorporating humane education into educational settings are discussed along with some of the challenges involved in its practical application. Furthermore, some implications are made for the inclusion of humane education in the pedagogical practice to raise the quality of education.

Keywords: humane education; advantages; challenges; future implications

Humane education (HE) as an instructional approach to teaching about important human values and our interconnectedness with all living creatures and planet Earth has been incorporated into various learning environments throughout the world. Despite some differences in definition and scope it has gained popularity in the last few decades and has resulted in a large body of publications, only a limited number of which will be addressed in the current article. The revived interest in humane education by both practitioners and researchers is intrinsically linked to various forms of social justice, human rights and anti-oppression movements, animal rights movements, animal welfare concerns, environmental ethics and ecopedagogy to name but a few. Nevertheless, it seems that, apart from its relatively steady growth in the North America, HE fails to achieve its “universal” objective and remains dependent upon school authorities, individual teacher’s initiatives and the outreach educational activities of animal protection organizations.

The above phenomenon might be a consequence of a widespread misconception deriving from the term “humane” which inevitably leads one to expect the kind of education advocating the humane treatment of animals alone, which is what HE used to be at its very beginning.

A Brief History of Humane Education

The origin of HE can be traced back to the formation of the first humane societies dedicated to the protection of animals and eventually children in the late 60s and early 70s of the 19th century in both USA and Canada. However, the kindness-to-animals ethics inherent in HE at the time was not an entirely new concept to human society. Within the Catholic tradition Saint Francis from Assisi was renowned for his love and concern for animals, whereas indigenous communities ranging from the Americas to Australia were characterized by respect for nature and all its living inhabitants. In these aboriginal cosmologies animals were often viewed as equal and sometimes superior to human beings (Domzalski & Gatarek 2010, 41). In addition, appreciation for the value of cultivating kindness to animals can be seen in the philosophy of John Locke, who argues that early signs of cruelty in children can be seen as a sign for lack of compassion not only towards animals but also towards those of their own kind (Unti & DeRosa 2003, 27). Conversely, the goal of early humane education to promote kindness to animals (primarily companion animals) originated from the belief that compassion to animals will eventually translate into kindness to people and the development of pro-social attitudes (Humes 2008, 66–67; Thompson & Gullone 2003).

In 1866, Henry Bergh founded the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). He was particularly shocked by the treatment of horses in New York but was additionally concerned about the cruelty to children. The animal anticruelty laws enabled Bergh to take to court and win a case of child abuse, which led to the forming of the first anticruelty laws to protect children (Goodall & Bekoff 2013).

Along with their animal protection campaigns, the early humane societies initially directed their efforts towards the education of both adults and children but later on shifted their attention to children in particular as a long-term response to the spread of animal cruelty (Unti & DeRosa 2003, 28).

At the forefront of HE in the 1880s was George T. Angell, founder of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (MSPCA) who coined the term “humane education”. He believed that teaching children kindness and respect for animals would encourage their overall moral development and that children who learned to be kind to animals would mature into kind and caring adults (Battle 2003). The MSPCA was responsible for the production and distribution of HE literature and the formation of the juveniles’ bands of mercy where members pledged to “be kind to all harmless living creatures and try to protect them from cruel usage.” (Unti & DeRosa 2003, 28).

Nonetheless, despite obvious efforts to make HE compulsory in education, it failed to achieve this objective in both the school system and the pre-service teacher training programmes. Thus, the existing animal anti-cruelty organizations remained the major educational provider for a long time.

During the 1990s, there was a significant shift in the scope of HE which began to encompass other issues of injustice, predominantly those related to environmental ethics and human rights. Humes (2008, 67-68) finds plausible explanations for this broadening in HE theory in three different factors: the founding of the Centre for Compassionate Living by Weil and Sikora in 1996; the publication of David Selby's book *Earthkind: A Teachers' Handbook on Humane Education* in 1995; and the upsurge of the animal advocacy movement.

According to Domzalski and Gatarek (2010) the current broad-based notion of humane education which involves human rights and environmental ethics as well as animal welfare can be most directly traced to the work of Jane Goodall. She realized that in order to save the chimpanzees of Gombe from extinction primatologists need to work in cooperation with the local communities and make saving the chimpanzees a more profitable business for the people than capturing or poaching them. Her holistic approach led to the establishment of the Roots and Shoots Youth Action Programme, which now has followers in more than 100 countries around the world (Domzalski & Gatarek 2010, 42 – 43).

Today, viewed in a broader sense, HE is more than just an assemblage of sub-topics comprising the field of study. As an “overarching philosophy (it) embarks on critical reflection of one's lifestyle, one's daily decision making, and how one relates to the natural world and all who abide within this world” (Caine 2015, 4).

Defining Humane Education

Although traditionally HE was associated with responsibilities regarding pet animals, it has included other thought provoking problems such as the exploitation of other species and the planet itself, poverty, war, prejudice and greed. It teaches kindness and respect towards animals as a first step in character development and hence in empathy development (Thomas & Beirne, 2002). It is grounded on the belief that showing kindness to animals goes hand in hand with human-directed empathy and values the interdependence of all living things on Earth (Battle 2003). That kind of education

It is, as Zoe Weil sums up, the kind of education that “seeks to create a truly humane world” (2006a). It aims at enhancing young people's knowledge, attitudes, and behavior toward the kind, compassionate, and responsible treatment of human and animal life alike (Ascione 1997).

Following a theoretical research based on scholarly literature, Tucker (2016) identified three distinct definitions of HE. The first one views HE as a field of inquiry and practice which focuses solely on the humane and ethical treatment of animals. The second one describes it as an initiative prioritizing moral reasoning and critical thinking within the context of animal rights and environmental education, whereas the third and last concept views HE as a professional field of education dedicated to the interconnected and transdisciplinary teaching of human rights,

animal protection, environmental ethics, and cultural issues in a holistic, values-based learning format.

Benefits of Humane Education

Whether taught as a separate school subject or integrated in the existing curricula, HE can be beneficial for students at various stages of their education, provided that it is offered in an age-appropriate way. By aiming at nurturing kindness and compassion towards all living beings on Earth (human and non-human alike), it inspires children to live in harmony with nature in an environmentally friendly way, fosters responsibility towards humans, animals and the environment and enhances the development of critical thinking, empathy and pro-social behavior (Thompson and Gullone 2003, 4 – 6). In addition, some researchers claim that HE will eventually result in active citizenship and non-violent conflict resolution (Tucker 2016, 26), as well as to more co-operative convivial ways of peaceful coexistence (Caine 2015, 7) based on the assumption that it develops empathy and pro-social behavior (Samuels 2018, 50). In addition, research findings indicate that HE can prove essentially beneficial for young children with compromised initial levels of prosociality (Samuels 2018, 61).

As an educational approach HE is similar but also different from other instructional approaches, such as ecopedagogy, education for sustainable development, value-oriented education and liberatory pedagogy. Unlike other pedagogies, however, which tackle the question of oppression and injustice, HE tries to look at all forms of injustice holistically and consider these issue from multiple angles and this is something that makes that form of instruction unique in itself (Humes 2008).

In line with the above, the goal of contemporary HE is to create a generation of people with the knowledge, commitment, skills and wisdom to bring about positive changes doing the most good and the least harm to people, animals and the environment (Weil 2007, 47). In order to achieve this goal young people need to acquire the knowledge about what is happening to our planet, to people and other species, to experience reverence and respect for others and a deep understanding that all forms of life are interconnected, to learn to think critically and creatively so that the solutions they arrive at and the choices they make are wise and intelligent. In this respect HE can be defined as altruistic and philanthropic since it teaches students to think about others' needs, feelings and suffering, consider the effects of their footprint on the planet, and reflect critically on the world and their place in it (Battle 2003).

HE is said to foster curiosity, creativity and critical thinking skills which enable learners to evaluate and solve problems, while simultaneously instilling respect, reverence and responsibility in learners (Weil 2006b, 4).

Last but not least, HE with its interdisciplinary nature and the broad scope of real-life problems which it addresses contributes to a better quality of education in the 21st century. It is worth noting that one of the United Nations sustainable development goals is the goal to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education

and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. One of the targets of this goal, which is directly linked to the environment states that “By 2030, (we should) ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.”. HE seems to hold the potential and the capacity to achieve that.

Despite the seemingly obvious benefits described so far, HE faces a number of challenges that need to be addressed to clarify some of the obstacles on the way to its acceptance as a universal value-centered educational approach.

Challenges and Future Implications

One serious question to be tackled is the question of practice. HE programmes are usually implemented as an elective course or an after-school programme and HE is not necessarily taught in pre-school, elementary or secondary school curricula. According to Weil HE will achieve its greatest promise when it is taught as a subject of its own or when it is incorporated into the existing curricula. This means that HE needs to be more fully integrated within the other school subjects either as a stand-alone subject or as HE themes/topics fused within the context matter of other subjects (Weil 2004). The latter can be achieved with the collaboration of teachers working together from a crossdisciplinary perspective.

The question of the school practice of HE leads to two other important implications that need further clarification. These are the training of HE teachers and academic research on HE pedagogies. Weil argues that becoming a skilled humane educator will require a thorough personal education on a variety of issues, such as environmental ethics, human rights, culture and society, and animal protection (Weil 2004). In order to be well-prepared and feel confident to teach the above issues teachers should either self-educate themselves or enroll in professional training courses and/or degrees in HE. In either case, taking into consideration their usual workload, teachers will have to put extra time and effort into mastering the necessary knowledge and skills and be intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to do so. More often than not, effective teaching and learning remains dependent on educators’ professional experience and pedagogical knowledge (Samuels et al. 2016, 598), whereas teaching about matters of injustice towards humans, animals and the environmental usually requires a lot of preparation and commitment since this kind of teaching involves exploring contentious issues and may be seen as challenging the status quo (Russel 2019).

At the same time, Humes (2008) outlines some considerable shortcomings of HE programmes in terms of presentation of social injustice issues. He seems primarily concerned with teachers’ limited views of forms of human oppression. While talking

about sweatshops as modern forms of slavery, warfare, poverty and terrorism and lack of sufficient food and water in developing countries, they somehow fail to recognize other forms of oppression as related to race, class, sexuality, gender, ability, etc. HE, Humes argues, tends to present social injustice in a simple way, often forgetting the issues that are “close to home” and additionally failing to “seriously engage with the tensions and contradictions that are numerous and often irreconcilable when talking about animal, ecological and human justice in concert”.

The creation of thoroughly planned HE pre-service and in-service academic courses for teachers will hopefully enable educators to meet some of the challenges described so far. Humane educators need sufficient training if they are to nurture new generations of responsible and caring young people willing to find meaningful solutions to problems and heal the hurts we have inflicted upon planet Earth (Goodall & Bekoff 2013).

Moreover, rigorous academic research focusing on closer cooperation between researchers and humane educators and more scientific publications on the effects of HE programmes on learners’ social and psychological development, their behavior and learning outcomes will be a further step in the right direction. The limited number of studies so far (Ascione 1997; Thompson & Gullone 2003; Humes 2008; Arbour et al., 2009) call for more research built upon sound methodological design in order for potential benefits and eventual drawbacks to be clearly outlined. Students’ gender, age, social background and personal history of human-animal relations should be taken into account as well in order for educational outcomes to be evaluated from different angles. At the same time, conducting well-designed studies with randomised controls, clear objectives and valid results will likely address the gaps left open by research so far (Samuels 2018, 51).

Conclusion

Despite obvious advantages for children in terms of character building, moral and psychological development, animal-directed and human-directed empathy, kindness, care and respect towards people, animals and the environment, HE faces certain challenges as an educational approach that need to be overcome if this kind of pedagogy is to be accepted and practically applied on a wider scale. Doubtless to say, it truly has the potential to become a transformative pedagogy and be put on the agenda of contemporary educational policy.

NOTES

1. Tucker, K. C., 2016. Teaching Through the Lens of Humane Education in U.S. Schools. Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies Collection [online]. [viewed 23 May 2021]. Available from: <http://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations>

2. United Nations' Environment Programme. [online]. [viewed 23 May 2021]. Available from: <https://www.unenvironment.org/explore-topics/sustainable-development-goals/why-do-sustainable-development-goals-matter/goal-4>

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