

## **The Effects of Transformational Humane Education on at Risk Youth in an Alternative School Setting**

**Professor Debbie Mims<sup>1</sup> & Rhondda Waddell<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

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The Transformational Humane Education (THE) IRB approved project promoted compassion and encouraged responsibility among middle and high school students enrolled in an alternative school. Interdisciplinary collaboration between the department of undergraduate social work and department of criminal justice, faculty and students, the alternative school staff (the principal, behavioral counselors, and teachers) conducted four humane education sessions, with the goal of helping highly at risk youth process and make ethical and humane decisions through working with animals. Each session was conducted with the entire student body. All students completed a pre/post-test. Conclusion: Humane education enables students to find workable solutions for a healthy, just society.

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**Keywords:** Humane Education; High-risk Youth; Interdisciplinary Collaboration

### **Introduction**

The purpose of The Transformational Humane Education project was to promote compassion and encourage responsibility among middle and high school adolescents who were of becoming school dropouts and juvenile delinquents. Humane education is about learning to respect life in our homes, communities and the environment. The study sought to encourage kindness and empathy for both human and nonhuman animals, and promoted understanding of our many diverse cultures and habitats. Most importantly, humane education strives to establish a sense of responsibility, making the world a better, more humane place (Wiel, 2004).

Humane education not only instills the desire and capacity to live with compassion, integrity, and wisdom, but also provides the knowledge and tools to put our values into action in meaningful, far-reaching ways.

Humane education enables us to find solutions that work for all by approaching human rights, environmental preservation, and animal protection as interconnected and integral dimensions of a healthy, just society.

Educational techniques focused on the process of learning by doing or experiencing as applied to the core standards for middle and high school students. David Korb's (1984, 2007) experiential educational techniques explains the objectives of the teaching process planned and articulated prior to undertaking the study experience, involving activity that is meaningful and real. Experiential education activities typically involve direct experience in the five stage processes listed below:

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Leo University, 33701 State Road 52, Saint Leo, FL 33574-6665, USA.

- 1) Exposure to and participation in the experience that is the basis of the educational activity.
- 2) Experimentation with that type of experience.
- 3) Individual reflection and facilitated debriefing during the educational activity aimed at enhancing the learning that occurs.
- 4) Application of the humane education principles involved to reinforce the learning and link it to new and old knowledge.
- 5) Internalization of the new knowledge in a way that will facilitate both recall and application for the learner.

The goal of the values clarification approach is to help students process what is of value in their own lives through self-discovery into life's situations. John Dewey (1958) proposed that these values can be applied to the beliefs and behavior patterns students are in the process of formulating. Decisions are based on our consciously or unconsciously held beliefs, attitudes and values. Valuing is composed of prizing and cherishing one's beliefs and behaviors; publicly affirming these beliefs when appropriate; choosing one's beliefs and behaviors from among alternatives; choosing after consideration of consequences; choosing freely; acting on one's beliefs; and acting with a pattern, consistency and repetition.

Lesson Plans Included:

Session # 1: What is Humane Education? Issues of Personal and Group Problem Solving (grades 6-12)

Overview of the issues involved in the field of humane education, this informative session provided a spring board for future discussions and lessons within the classroom. Students were expected to become knowledgeable of key issues while weighing the need for involvement with various organizations.

An interactive presentation dealing with how to have discussions on controversial subjects were explored in the session. Students were introduced to differing ways to process and understand the reasoning behind differing views. Topics for discussion included: issues of zoos, hunting, bullying, prejudice, dog fighting, environmental protection, the preservation of wilderness, and more. Students were encouraged to create their own discussions in group activities and writing assignments, or through role plays and interactive big screen presentations.

Session # 2: The Human Animal Bond and How Animals Are Our Best Friends (grades 6-12)

This interactive presentation was directed toward the historical background of how animals were domesticated and assisted humans throughout history. A variety of human-animal bonding topics were discussed with an emphasis on how companion animals serve through therapy, service to the disabled, rescue, and military/police service. Students were expected to come to understand the power of the human animal bond and the benefits of animals to society. This session was presented as a big screen presentation, and through animal related interactive activities offered in the classroom setting. An in-depth look at issues surrounding companion animals within the United States was explored with the students. Key issues include overpopulation, abuse, responsible pet ownership, legislative policies, and solution based problem solving. Student based discussions allow the opportunity to form personal decisions regarding future actions.

Session #3: Animal Agility: How To Train An Animal? (grades 6-12)

A canine agility session emphasized personal improvement and commitment to training and responsibility. Dog and handler teams set their own goals, demonstrated training techniques and worked towards completion of each set at their own pace. Student agility participants partook in agility runs irrespective of the performance of other dog and student teams.

Many agility teams are continually striving for a "clean run" - under time with no faults which was not an emphasis of this activity. Students learned the process of animal training and to measure success against the dogs own agility training goals, their level of enjoyment, and by the growth of their relationship with the agility dogs during the session.

Session # 4: Our Environment, Our Concerns (grades 6-12)

This session explored with students the need for protection of the environment and our responsibility to care for our planet. It drew connections between all forms of environmental issues to include the need to re-cycle our waste, to issues related to global warming, and the effects that factory farming is having on our planet, from human oppression to animal exploitation to ecological degradation.

#### Research Methods

Students enrolled in the James Irvin Education Center, an area alternative school for students between the ages of 12 and 18 participated in the Transformational Humane Education project over a four week session, and were the target of this purposive study. All of the participants were middle or high school level students working to complete their high school diploma. Four 50 minute lessons in humane education were incorporated using a variety of educational techniques and models that included experiential education, values clarification, and philosophy. The participants were measured twice during the course using a pretest-posttest design.

The Principal Investigator (PI) provided a description of the study to the James Irvin Education Center Principal, in which both the pre and post tests were described in detail. The school principal gave the students the option of participating in the Transformational Humane Education project, or the option to attend an alternative study session provided for those unwilling/unable to participate or those who lacked permission from their parents. Those students that voluntarily choose to participate in the study took home a written consent form for their parent or guardian to read and sign, an implied parental/guardian consent form to be signed by the parent/guardian, and an assent consent form to be signed by the student granting permission to participate in the Transformational Humane Education project.

The parents or guardians and students were provided a letter of explanation of the project, the two consent forms and assent forms were provided and obtained with their signature, and a telephone number to speak directly to the PI for additional consultation and explanations as needed.

The student participants from James Irvin Education Center that participated in the Transformational Humane Education project were measured twice during the course using a pretest-posttest designed instrument. At the beginning of the first session of the four session series students answered twelve true false questions, and at the end of the four session series questions that sought answers regarding knowledge and skills gained during the training administered during the Transformational Humane Education project on the following areas:

- 1) Students knowledge regarding companion animals within the United States on key issues that included: overpopulation, abuse, responsible pet ownership, legislative policies, and solution based problem solving.
- 2) Students understanding of a variety of humanitarian topics (ie., issues of zoos, hunting, and factory farming) with an emphasis on their working structure and the power of involvement and benefits of volunteering to create change.
- 3) Students' attitudes regarding controversial issues facing our society and reasoning behind differing views that include: (environmental protection, bullying, hatred demonstrated toward diverse members of society).

Participants were assured that no risk would be involved in the study, and that the Principal Investigator of the study, a doctorate level social worker with a Florida Clinical Social Work license was readily available. A phone number to speak to the Principal Investigator directly with any questions or concerns was provided to all study participants and their parents. Additionally, the co-principal investigator, a retired police officer, was available to answer questions and concerns as well, and her phone number was made available to the parent/guardians and students participating in the study.

Anonymity was assured and confidentiality maintained in the data collection, storage, and analysis of the data throughout the study by an independent researcher employed by Saint Leo University as a graduate assistant working on her Master's degree in Health Care Administration, who does not teach in the course and does not know the students who was responsible for collecting the pre and post- tests, and responsible for the coordination of the identifiers set up for each student's responses.

The Principal and Co-Principal Investigator were responsible for the data analysis and statistical analysis. Since the questionnaire data included repeated measures on the same participants it was essential that data be linked. To maintain confidentiality, students were instructed to create a unique identifier having two characteristics:

1) It was to be known only to the student(s) and, 2) memory would play a role in its creation. The six part identifier consisted of two letters followed by four numbers. The first letter was the first initial of the participant's mother's first name and the second letter was the first initial of the participant's father's name. The four numbers that followed represented the month of the mother's birthday, expressed as two digits, followed by the month of the father's birthday. All information collected for analyses were coded with this identifier. In addition to these unique student identifiers, the original group numbers in which the students were assigned for active learning exercises were reassigned a new specific identifying number for use in the study. This provided an additional layer of anonymity. The data analyst was the caretaker of the master list relating: 1) student identifiers to group membership and 2) reassigned group numbers to the original group number. The raw data, master lists, and the final pooled data set were stored in an independent, secure location. In the final data set, compiled for analysis by the researchers, the data was pooled and de-identified preserving the anonymity of the individual students. These procedures ensured that the student data used in the analysis was recorded in such a way that it could not be traced back to an individual participant and that neither the Principal Investigator nor any instructor teaching in the project would be able to identify participants.

Once the data had been gathered and de-identified by the graduate assistant, the Principal Investigator and Co-PI were allowed access to the data for analysis purposes. The research results were used to determine the value of humane education for middle and high school educational purposes.

## **Study Results**

The idea of pre and post testing of students is often accepted as a viable method to assess the extent to which an educational intervention has had an impact on student 'learning'.

In this study the pre- and post-test for the given subject contained essentially the same questions and the same scoring guide used to evaluate both tests. The calculated percentage change in performance between the pre-test and post-test was the target of the test result and revealed no significance overall, but a range of difference per question. Those numbers were then averaged and divided by the total to show a percentage change to indicate the degree of improvement in student knowledge expressed as a percentage for the class as a whole. The final results of the pre-test participants revealed that the sample population demographics for the 40 pre-tests included in terms of student participants by grade level: Grades levels of students were 90% in 7th through 9th grades with 10% of students taking the pre-test in 10th grade and higher.

There were 81% males and 18% females and 1% unknown accounting for gender as student participants on the pre-test. The participants reported their ethnic backgrounds to be Hispanic 23%, black 12%, white 40% and unknown 10%.

The final results of the post-test participants revealed that the sample population demographics for the 41 post-tests included in terms of student participants by grade level 78% were 7th through 9th graders with 22% in the 10th grade and higher. There were 58% males and 42% females accounting for gender as student participants on the post-test.

The participants reported their ethnic backgrounds to be Hispanic 15%, black 5%, white 23% and unknown 50%. Career oriented questions when compared between the pre and post- test participants responses indicated:

1. Minority groups of blacks and Hispanics valued the humane education and perspective career opportunities more than whites and unknown students.
2. Minority groups were smaller in numbers for both pre and post-test sample populations.
3. The lower grades 7th through 9th grades were more knowledgeable on both the pre and post-tests.
4. Students' level of interest in careers and information on animal rights were highest among Hispanics at 50% rather than with whites, blacks, and unknowns about the topic.
5. In regard to environmental protection Hispanics and black students demonstrated some knowledge with regard to the topic, whereas the white student's lacked interest in the topic for both future study and career opportunities.

Overall results of the Pre and Post Test per Individual Question Revealed:

- |                                     |                        |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. 75% improvement                  | 7. 50% improvement     |
| 2. Relatively the same              | 8. Relatively the same |
| 3. 4X greater incorrect on the post | 9. Improvement         |
| 4. No change                        | 10. Improvement        |
| 5. Relatively the same              | 11. Improvement        |
| 6. Relatively the same              | 12. 100% improvement   |

Lessons Learned:

In this study, the focus was on high-risk middle and high school students in a rural community, where adolescents were academic or behavioral (or both) challenged in an academic setting. Our study provides the first strong support in our community for the suggestion that humane education can be a strong career interest to younger high-risk adolescent students in the middle school years versus older high risk students in high school, and sparked interest in this same age group and particularly with minority students. The study was challenged by inconsistency between students that were allowed to attend in the four study sessions. The administrative assignments by participants in each session made the pre and post testing process more challenging to match tests for clear results, and would require stricter control over which students would be allowed to participate in the four study sessions in the future. Additionally, classroom teachers that were expected to conduct follow up discussions on the transformational humane education topics would require more extensive preparation and training than was offered during this pilot study. Each teacher was provided video and transcribed scripts for each session and offered a Prezi software presentation lecture approach covering each topic, however, the dissemination of this information from teacher to individual classroom was noted to be inconsistent.

Although this study demonstrated needed changes to improve the operationalization of the study methods, the study dealt with an introductory humane education agenda and was not representative of a comprehensive humane education program. The take-away information was the same: What and how we teach middle and high school students influences not just current academic learning and behaviors, but also influences their future career paths as adults.

This study highlights yet another reason that every school, everywhere, should operate through the lens of humane education.

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## Appendix

Transformational Humane Education Project Pre and Post Test Answer Sheet:

Confidential Identifier: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_ Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Part I: Circle the answer to the questions either as true or false:

- The name of the sport in which handlers guide their dogs through a timed obstacle course is referred to as action course training?  
 T  
 F X     The correct answer: Agility Course
- The problems or dangers that animals like dogs or cats might face include abandonment and poor nutrition?  
 T X  
 F
- The ways that we can help animals like dogs and cats includes spaying and neutering them?  
 T X  
 F
- The problems or dangers that animals encounter who live on factory farms (like cows, pigs and chickens) include administration of hormones in their diets and limited space to live?  
 T X  
 F
- The ways that we can help animals who live on farms (like cows, pigs and chickens) is to eat more of their animal product?  
 T  
 F X     Correct answer: A decrease in demand would result in decreased supply (and abuse).
- Some of the problems or dangers that wild animals might face are starvation in the winter or extinction due to hunters?  
 T X  
 F
- The best ways that we can help wild animals are to eat them or use their animal products?  
 T  
 F X     Correct answer: Wild animals should be allowed to self-regulate and live free.

8. Some of the biggest problems that diverse young people face include hatred, bullying, and prejudice?  
T X  
F

9. Some ways that we can help young people being bullied is to leave them alone?  
T  
F X Correct answer: People being bullied need to have support from others to protect them.

10. Some of the problems or dangers facing the environment include lack of recycling, use of trees for fuel, and factory pollution?  
T X  
F

11. Several ways that we can help the environment is drive a large vehicle, use lots of water for brushing our teeth, and use plastic every chance we can for food containers?  
T  
F X Correct answer: We need to conserve in all areas of fossil fuel usage, and other resources such as water.

12. The easiest obstacle for the dog to learn when teaching agility is to run through the tunnel?  
T  
F X Correct answer: This is the hardest trick to teach on the agility course.

Part II: Additional Questions

What grade are you in? \_\_\_\_\_

Would you be interested in working in the areas of humane education we discussed as a future career?

Y N

If so, would you like to work with students in education regarding human rights circle yes or no here?

Y N

Would you want to work with animals in your future career circle yes or no here?

Y N

Would you want to work in the area of environmental protection in your future career circle yes or no here?

Y N