

The Five Freedoms for Animals as a basic learning requirement for all young learners

Louise van der Merwe (Humane Education Trust, South Africa)

Abstract:

A humane education pilot project in Cape Town that focuses on the principle of justice for nonhumans has achieved attention from South African education authorities who are under societal pressure to inculcate values in learning.

Humane education was included in the South African schools' curriculum in 2012 with an emphasis on companion animals. However, empirical evidence shows little or no apparent improvement in the treatment of these animals. In the Cape Town metropolitan area alone, some 6 million ZAR (332 000 GBP) is spent annually on euthanizing and burying unwanted companion animals as landfill.

In response to the disjunction between (theoretical) curricular innovation and (practical) teaching and learning, young pupils from disadvantaged communities are the beneficiaries of a new learning programme based on the Five Freedoms for Animals with a focus on companion animals. The Five Freedoms are endorsed by the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and have been recommended as a component of early childhood development in educational institutions as a matter of national urgency, as a vital step in humanity's quest for a world where living beings, humans and nonhumans, have a right of passage through life, unhindered by exploitation and cruelty.

Topic of Research Project:

The Five Freedoms for Animals, as endorsed by the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), should be incorporated in the South African National School Curriculum as a fundamental learning requirement for all young learners along with their ABCs and 123s.

Relevant background information

The sustainability of the environment is entrenched in the South African Constitution, which in turn underpins and is reflected in the National School Curriculum.

In 2001 and 2002, with South African struggle icon Kader Asmal as Minister of Education, a decision was taken to revise the national school curriculum with a view to the inclusion of environmental education in the curriculum. This process was known as NEEP (National Environmental Education Project). The Humane Education Trust (HET) was invited by the Department of Education to participate in NEEP and assist with the incorporation of animal welfare as part of environmental education. The revised curriculum subsequently came into being in 2012 and included multiple opportunities for the teaching of animal welfare.

Roughly 9% of the entire curriculum for Grades 1-12 comprises environmental education (including animal welfare/humane education). The last census for all nine provinces showed that the basic education system comprised 12 644 208 learners, 30 586 schools, and 439 394 teachers.

However, since 2012, it has become apparent that teachers are often not equipped with enough background knowledge about animal welfare issues to teach it effectively. This is exacerbated by:

- (1) A Westernised education system that, for generations, has stifled the development of Emotional Intelligence (EI) because EI has been associated with illogicality and weakness, in contrast to subjects such as science, technology, mathematics, and more recently, robotics and coding.
- (2) The generally prevailing societal sense that animals exist for human use and are undeserving of respect in their own right.
- (3) The prevailing generalised belief that compassion towards animals is an inappropriate ‘white’ or ‘Western’ indulgence in a country where there has been and continues to be so much human suffering.

The United Nations’ development goals¹ state that by 2030 all learners should acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development including Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7 (a culture of peace and nonviolence) and SDG 12.8 (a lifestyle in harmony with nature). The Humane Education Trust is of the view that sustainable development will simply never be achieved unless the skills inherent in our understanding of modern EI education, namely empathy and compassion in a post-anthropocentric world, are nurtured and developed to become vital components in all decision-making.

Post-democracy South Africa is experiencing unprecedented violence. The scourge of brutality, including domestic violence, rape, child rape and murder, as well as animal abuse, is pervasive across the country². The seminal resource book on intersections of violence, ‘Child Abuse, Domestic Violence and Animals Abuse: Linking the Circles of Compassion

¹ United Nations, “The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, <https://sdg4education2030.org/the-goal>

² Merten. Marianne. “Official statistics prove war on women is real and pretty words are mere lip service”, 4 September 2019, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-09-04-official-statistics-prove-war-on-women-is-real-and-pretty-words-are-mere-lip-service/>

for Prevention and Intervention’, features strongly in all our resources for teachers³. Co-author of the book, Phil Arkow who chairs the Animal Abuse and Family Violence Prevention Project at the Latham Foundation, USA, explains: “The abuse of animals is often the first step on the slippery slope of desensitization, the first step down that slope of a lack of empathy and violence. All too often animals are the first victims and what should be seen as a red flag or warning marker, is readily dismissed by parents and teachers as oh well, boys will be boys, or it’s only a rabbit, what’s the big deal?”

Against this background, and in light of the intersection of domestic violence, child abuse and animal abuse, HET embarked on a pilot research project, as set out below, to assess the impact on learners of teaching the most basic of animal welfare principles, namely ‘The Five Freedoms for Animals’.

The Five Freedoms for Animals, as endorsed by The World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and by many governments internationally, including the South African government, are as follows:

- Freedom from hunger and thirst
- Freedom from discomfort
- Freedom from pain, injury and disease
- Freedom to express normal behaviour
- Freedom from fear and distress

The HET’s pilot project was underpinned by a landmark judgement in our Constitutional Court⁴, which ruled that:

- Animals have intrinsic value as individuals.
- Animals are sentient beings capable of suffering and experiencing pain.
- Guardianship of the interests of animals reflects constitutional values and the interests of society at large.
- Animal protection safeguards the moral status of humans and the degeneration of human values.

³ Ascione, Frank and Arkow, Phil. *Child Abuse, Domestic Violence, and Animal Abuse: Linking the Circles of Compassion for Prevention and Intervention*. Purdue University Press: 1999.

⁴ <http://www.saflii.org/za/cases/ZACC/2016/46.html>

The Department of Education has, in addition, stated that it supports a renewed focus on “values driven learning”⁵. As stated by Warda Conrad, Director of Business Strategy and Stakeholder Management at the Western Cape Education Department: “We are trying to transform the way children think about themselves in the community and themselves in relation to others and one of those things that we are focusing on is values.”

The HET contends that learning about the Five Freedoms for Animals as part of the learning area known as Life Skills, in the Foundation Phase of schooling (ages 5-9), entrenches basic values such as ethics, integrity and empathy, into learner perceptions. Although the focus is on companion animals in the teaching of the Five Freedoms in the Foundation Phase, this focus forms fertile groundwork for the tackling of wider animal welfare issues in the Intermediate Phase (ages 10-12) and in the Senior Phase (ages 13-17). In connection with this, the HET has developed curriculum-aligned multi-lingual resources including a Teacher’s Guides to Humane Education, for Life Skills and Life Orientation in all three phases.

The urgency for the inclusion of the Five Freedoms for Animals in education is all the more imperative as the world enters an age where anthropocentric learning⁶ is at odds with our new understanding of our fragile world. In his book *Earth Emotions*, geoscientist and eco-philosopher Glenn Albrecht puts it this way: The tragedy is that as humans become more and more comfortable with artificial intelligence and robotic companions, each subsequent generation separates further from nature, widening the gulf so that an impoverished nature becomes accepted as the norm. Little wonder then, he says, that children grow up with no understanding or empathy for the natural world, nor their place in it. He says this is why education needs urgently to equip school children with knowledge of the science of symbiosis, making them the first generation to walk out of the Anthropocene (Age of man) epoch and into the Symbiocene (the interconnectedness of life) epoch⁷.

Daniel Goleman, former senior editor at *Psychology Today*, is one of many contemporary thinkers exploring the immense social cost of being “emotionally tone deaf”⁸. In his book *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*, Goleman says “There are times

⁵ Van der Merwe, Louise. “Comments from the Education Department”, 2018, <https://caringclassrooms.co.za/>

⁶ Murriss, Karin. *The Posthuman Child*. Routledge: 2016.

⁷ Albrecht, Glenn. *Earth Emotions*. Cornell University Press: 2018.

⁸ Goleman, Daniel. *Emotional Intelligence*. Bloomsbury: 1995.

when the fabric of society seems to unravel at ever-greater speed, when selfishness, violence, and a meanness of spirit seem to be rotting the goodness of our communal lives.” He says there is a worldwide trend for the present generation of children to be more troubled emotionally than the last: more lonely and depressed, more angry and unruly, more nervous and prone to worry, more impulsive and aggressive. “If there is a remedy,” he says, “I feel it must lie in how we prepare our young for life. At present we leave the emotional education of our children to chance. One solution is a new vision of what schools can do to educate the whole student, bringing together mind and heart in the classroom.”

2017/18 – The HET’S first Pilot Research Project based on the Five Freedoms for Animals:

In 2017 the HET, in cooperation with the principal of Forest Heights Primary School, Mrs Anthea Bosman, provided resources to enable a class of Grade 3 learners at this school to receive a comprehensive understanding of ‘The Five Freedoms for Animals’.

The Grade 3 class comprised 42 learners, both boys and girls, and the average age was 9 years old. Situated about 40km outside Cape Town, the school services a community with socio-economic challenges that include poverty, unemployment, domestic violence, depression, drug addiction, suicide among young adults, environmental degradation, and animal neglect and cruelty – including organised dog fighting.

Synopsis of the method of teaching the Five Freedoms for Animals:

The school year in South African is divided into four terms. At the beginning of the first term of 2018, the following resources were supplied to the class teacher, Mrs Vivienne Rutgers:

- A board game using felt cut-outs and a book titled Caring Kids, comprising six stories on a variety of aspects of animal welfare, to stimulate discussion on responsible pet ownership and animal welfare issues in general.
- A variety of posters depicting ‘The Five Freedoms for Animals’ to stimulate discussion.
- A puppet play script titled ‘The Five Freedoms for Animals’ dealing with fairness and justice towards all living beings (duration of puppet play: 7 minutes).
- Hand puppets representing characters in the puppet play.

Over a period of three terms (10 weeks per term), at a rate of 2 hours and 55 minutes per week (35 minute Life Skills lessons over 5 days a week), the pupils were taught the Five Freedoms programme using the above-mentioned resources, in order to:

- Familiarise the learners to various aspects of animal welfare issues.
- Familiarise the learners with the concepts of the Five Freedoms.
- Ensure their verbal and written understanding of these concepts.
- Ensure that the learners could read the script of the puppet play with fluency and understanding.
- Ensure that each learner attained proficiency in each of the roles of the various participants in the play (10 character roles in all).
- Ensure that learners understood the meaning of **sentience** as something shared by humans and animals with specific attention to the power of the words we unconsciously use to minimise, commodify and denigrate not only animals, but each other too, and which underpin bullying behaviour

By the end of the third term, the learners showed significant proficiency in their understanding of The Five Freedoms and in their performance of the puppet play.

Follow-up on the HET'S first Pilot Research Project (2017/18) after one year:

Of significance, one year later, although these learners had not received any further instruction on the Five Freedoms, they all retained significant memory of the Five Freedoms as demonstrated by the results of the following questionnaires:

Question 1:

When you think back on The Five Freedoms for Animals, which freedom is the first that comes to your mind?

Of the 42 learners:

34 replied "Freedom from hunger and thirst"

6 replied "Freedoms from pain, injury and disease"

2 replied "Freedom from discomfort"

Question 2:

Do you think it is important for learners to know about The Five Freedoms for Animals?

Please give a reason for your answer.

Of the 42 learners, 100% replied in the affirmative.

Reasons included:

- “Because the Five Freedoms is something we need to know”
- “Because if you help animals you will become very kind and help people also”
- “Because the Five Freedoms make me feel like a hero”
- “Because the Five Freedoms make us better people”
- “Because I know now how to treat my dog”
- “Because the Five Freedoms make you into a champion”
- “Because people will become kind”
- “Because some people will become good from this learning”
- “Because now I can teach my uncle about the Five Freedoms when he beats his donkey”
- “Because I love the puppet show and everyone says I should be an actress when I grow up”

2019 – The HET’S second Pilot Research Project based on the Five Freedoms for Animals:

On the strength of the success of the HET’s 2017/18 Pilot Project, the HET was fortunate enough to be given a grant by the Latham Foundation to widen the focus of this project. The US-based Latham Foundation is a leading proponent internationally of the imperative to make the skills of empathy, kindness and compassion central to education. Latham states that kindness to animals is the first and truly foundational step that supports all the other steps above it in the building of compassionate and empathic communities, countries, nations and a new world ethos⁹.

Initially, all 457 learners in the Foundation Phase of Forest Heights Primary School participated in the entry-level questionnaire. Foundation Phase includes Grades R-3, ages 5-9. However, despite reassurances by the teachers concerned, only three classes of 46 learners each consistently incorporated the programme for a full year, significantly reducing our data base for this research.

Results of entry-level questionnaires for the learners in the HET’s 2019 Pilot Project:

⁹ <https://www.latham.org>

Entry-level question for all 457 learners: Do animals have feelings? 55% said yes, 45% said no. Second entry-level question for all 457 learners: Do you think your companion animal is happy? 58% said yes, 42% said no.

Follow-up on the HET'S 2019 Pilot Project after three terms:

At the time of writing this paper, only 46 learners in one Grade 2 class, with an average age of 8 years old, were ready for a follow-up questionnaire. Some were absent. They were asked if learning about the Freedoms had made a difference to the way they relate to animals. Their replies, set out below, were taken individually and not in the presence of peers.

- I look to see if my dogs have clean water and fresh food before I go to school.
- I know now that animals have feelings. I try to treat them with respect.
- I know my puppy cares for my whole family. If I fall he licks me. I love and respect all animals.
- I know my dog gets hungry too so I make sure there is enough food for my dog.
- When my dog whimpers I see he looks sad and his tail is between his legs. He is showing me he is unhappy or hungry.
- I will not hurt my dog anymore.
- My dog doesn't like to be inside all the time, he wants to play with a tennis ball. He shows normal behaviour. I am his guardian.
- I allow my dog to jump up on me when I come from school. I know he expresses normal behaviour.
- I am a better guardian.
- I don't tease my dog to make him angry anymore.
- If I get a new cat I will give him a good life this time. I am more responsible.
- I take my dog to the mobile vet because he also needs care.
- I won't leave the gate open because my dog can run away or get knocked down. I will be responsible.
- I know my cat also has feelings and so I see that her basket and blanket are clean and her bedding washed. Now she is more comfortable.
- If my dog looks scared when I get home I pick him up and cuddle him because he is still a puppy.
- I won't tease my cat anymore.

- I whistle and then the cows come back. If one is lost I go with my uncle to look for him.
- I saw an injured dog and I told his guardian to take him to the vet. I know my parents are my guardians.
- I tell my friends not to tease my dog because then he will bite them because he is scared.
- I look for ticks and fleas and take my dog to the veterinarian.
- When I saw a stray kitten, I took it home and fed it and I will find a nice home for it.
- I am kinder to my dog.
- My dog feels scared when children throw stones at her. I'm kinder now.
- Someone hit my dog with a stone. I went to tell his mom. My dog was bleeding and we took him to the mobile vet.
- I see that animals are cute and can be happy. I understand that they need to be free.
- My dog jumps on me and licks my face. I allow him to jump for joy.
- When someone teases my cat I don't laugh at them. I tell them that my cat is scared of them.
- My dog used to be on a short chain so my dad bought a long chain. I run with my dog for exercise.
- I used not to give my dog food in the morning. Now I do. I also look to see if he has clean water.
- I tell my friends about the Freedom from pain, injury and disease and that they must not throw stones at animals.
- I allow my dog to jump on me and be joyful.
- If I get a new dog I will let him come inside this time.
- I used to hit my dogs when they fought for food in the bowl. Now I put their food into different bowls.
- I don't tease my dog anymore because he gets cross.
- Before I go to bed I check if my dog is in his kennel.
- I know that when my dog keeps on barking he is being teased and sometimes he is feeling pain.
- I tell my cousins about the Freedoms and how they must respect animals.
- I know my dog has feelings. When his tail is between his legs, it shows he is scared and when his tail wags he is happy.

- I won't hurt animals. I won't tie any dogs on a short chain. Now I know that when my puppy chases me to play, it is normal behaviour.
- I will not tease animals or throw stones at them.
- Now I don't throw stones at dogs anymore.

Empirical evidence of development of empathy:

Vivienne Rutgers, the teacher spear-heading the programme in the class of 46 learners, said the pilot project had achieved a breakthrough in education in the sense that the learners began to show the early manifestations of empathy for nonhuman beings. She reported to The Humane Education Trust: “An example is the discussion I overheard in the playground recently. A dove was sun-bathing nearby, extending its wing to catch the rays of warmth. Two nine-year-old boys saw this and the one said to the other: ‘See! That’s Freedom from Pain, Injury and Disease’. ‘No,’ argued the other. ‘That’s Freedom to Express Normal Behaviour.’ They amicably argued the point. Our Five Freedoms pilot project had opened a new window of curiosity for them that would otherwise have remained closed. It was really heart-warming. Without the programme, they probably would not have even noticed the bird or, based on my experience, they may well have decided to chase it away by throwing stones at it.”

“On another occasion recently, we unlocked the classroom for the day’s schoolwork to begin, only to find a little bird had somehow been shut in all night. It perched on the rail above one of the windows and was clearly traumatised by the sudden surge of 46 children into the room. Before the introduction of the Caring Classrooms programme, I believe the children would have caused pandemonium trying to catch the bird. Instead, they heard me... I said ‘sit quietly, I’ll open the window, and we will be patient while the bird finds its way out’. The little bird took a significant amount of time to do this but as it hopped nearer to the open window, one child whispered ‘nearly there’, as encouragement to the bird. To hear that whisper, all 46 children had to have been as quiet as mice. Then several of the children whispered ‘nearly there’ with every hop the bird took in the right direction. And we all whooped when it finally flew out. That ‘nearly there’ whisper of encouragement was empathy in action across species, and I hadn’t seen it before.”

Conclusion:

Reforming Education to produce first-class humans

Education reform to include the development of EI and its core component of empathy must become a priority and be placed at the core of Life Skills and Life Orientation curricula as a matter of urgency. German data scientist Andreas Schleicher, head of the Education Division at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), believes our education system is a relic of the industrial age. He explains: “The kinds of things that are easy to teach, and maybe easy to test, are precisely the kinds of things that are easy to digitize and to automate. The advent of AI should push us to think harder about what makes us human – our capacity for empathy and creativity.” If we don’t, he says, the world will be educating “second-class robots and not first-class humans.”¹⁰

Simon Baron-Cohen, professor of Developmental Psychopathology at the University of Cambridge, agrees. He says there is growing evidence for the argument “that instead of using the term evil, we should talk about reduced (or even absent) empathy.” He continues: “The critical role of empathy in our society has been overlooked. Empathy is the most valuable social resource in our world... It is puzzling that in school or parenting curricula empathy figures hardly at all, and in politics, business, the courts, or policing, it is rarely, if ever, on the agenda. The erosion of empathy is a critical global issue of our time.”¹¹

The HET contends that ours is the first era that cannot escape the consequences of our foolhardy neglect of emotional intelligence, seen everywhere in our callous and reckless abuse of our environment and the animals that are part of the living world. Our own road to healing starts with those who are at our mercy – the animals.

The learners’ responses in the HET’s pilot projects demonstrate that learning the Five Freedoms for Animals is a positive experience and reinforces the learners’ sense of self-esteem, self-reliance, assertiveness and instils in them a sense of responsibility for the world in which we all live, instilling goodwill and hope for a kinder future. **However, the Five Freedoms programme requires support and political will from the Department of**

¹⁰ Schleicher, Andreas. “How changing the PISA test could change how kids learn,” *Quartz*, 22 February 2019, <https://qz.com/1540222/how-changing-the-pisa-test-could-change-how-kids-learn/>

¹¹ Baron-Cohen, Simon. *The Science of Evil*. Basic Books: 2011.

Education in the form of teacher workshops to assist teachers to prepare for and embrace a post-anthropocene era of education.

The Foundation Phase, those years in a child's life where neuroscience shows our brains to be the most malleable, is a crucial window of opportunity to teach the basic principles of ethics and integrity so that they become second nature. The Five Freedoms for Animals, as endorsed by the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), is an essential component of early childhood development in schools and educational institutions the world over, a basic learning requirement for all young learners, along with their 123s and ABCs.

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Short biographical note:

Louise van der Merwe is the Founder and Managing Trustee of The Humane Education Trust, South Africa, and the Editor of the magazine *Animal Voice*. In 2011 Louise was presented with the Winner's Trophy at the annual Feather Awards and 1st for Women Insurance Brokers ceremony, for her development of Humane Education in South Africa. In

2013 Louise was presented with a trophy by the City of Cape Town's Environmental Resources Management Department for her contribution and commitment to Humane Education. Published books include

Teacher's Guide to Humane Education,

Goosie's Story, and

Heroes and Lionhearts.