

RESEARCH IN REVIEW

Animals in the Classroom: The Debate Continues

by Karen Nelson Baker,
NAHEE Intern, Brown University

Motivating students to learn about animals without using teaching methods that may be considered inhumane—such as the use of live animals in the classroom—is a difficult dilemma for many teachers.

The Humane Society of the United States guidelines state, "The teacher must have clearly stated educational objectives for the use of live animals in the classroom, and live animals should be used only when these objectives cannot be met through the use of other instructional methods and materials."

Teachers who adhere to these guidelines rarely can justify bringing a live animal into the classroom. Other educators, however, believe the presence of live animals in the classroom is an effective tool for motivating students to learn and for generating an interest in animal related subjects.

In a 1985 study, Walter Saunders and Gary Young, from Utah State University, addressed the debate over animals in the classroom. Their study measured the effects of having living stimuli in the classroom on students' knowledge of and attitudes toward biology. They set up control and experimental classes at Roy High School in Weber County, Utah.

The control group was a general-purpose classroom equipped with gas outlets and sinks. No plants or animals were present in this classroom at any time during the study.

The experimental group classroom was equipped with a wide variety of displays including 18 pairs of mating rock doves, a beehive, two tropical terrariums, an aquarium, gerbils, a dwarf rabbit, six mouse mating cages, and randomly placed plants. At no time was the attention of the students in the experimental group directed toward the displays. The two teachers involved in the study used identical concepts, texts, and teaching methods during the treatment period. Both the control and experimental groups were tested before and after the treatment, using instruments that measured their knowledge of biology and their attitudes toward science.

The results obtained by Saunders and Young clearly show that, in every case, improvement from pretest to post-test shown by the experimental group far exceeded the improvement shown by the

control group. The control group scores never fell from pretest to post-test, but the improvement was often negligible in comparison to that shown by the experimental group. Saunders and Young conclude that an "attractive" visual environment encourages student achievements and attitudes better than a sterile or "barren" classroom.

Because of several problems with this study's design, however, the support it provides for using animals in the classroom is inconclusive. Saunders and Young did not address the question of the effect of animals in the classroom on student attitudes toward animals. Thus they omit what we as humane educators consider to be an important educational objective: the development of respect and concern for all that lives.

More obviously, Saunders and Young assume a strict dichotomy between the "sterile" or "barren" classroom and the classroom overflowing with displays calculated to fascinate students. That such displays will capture the interest of young people is hardly surprising. What is surprising is how little imagination the researchers used in designing a classroom without living things. Such a classroom could contain pictures or posters of animals in their natural habitats; charts or diagrams of ecological relationships, animal habits, or any other subject; models of animals; plants; and many other "visual stimuli." A room arranged in this way could be interesting without confining animals and risking the neglect and mistreatment that sometimes occurs when live animals are brought into the classroom.

There is a need for further research that compares the use of animals in the classroom with realistic and creative alternatives and that measures students' attitudes toward animals under the varying methods. (Of course, in any future research conducted, the choice of classroom animal and the manner in which it is treated should accord with strict standards of humaneness. Such standards are provided in guidelines available from NAHEE.) It may be the case that such research would suggest that classroom animals are indeed a valuable learning and motivating tool. Whether or not such a conclusion would justify the widespread use of animals in the classroom, however, is still open to debate.