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Exploring the Relationship between Humane Education and Active Citizenship in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of humane education and active citizenship, emphasizing how nurturing empathy, critical thinking, and ethical decision-making through education fosters active citizenship. Humane education, which incorporates themes of environmental stewardship, social justice, animal welfare, and global interdependence, serves as a transformative tool for cultivating active, informed, and ethical citizens from an early age. The education of individuals from their earliest years with universal and democratic values, the principles of human rights, and a clear orientation toward respect for all living beings can contribute, on the one hand, to shaping active future citizens who prioritize the right to life and, on the other hand, to the humanization of the individual and the effort to establish lasting peace worldwide. Only within an educational environment characterized by a spirit of solidarity, mutual understanding, and respect—not only for all people but also for all living organisms—can peaceful coexistence truly be achieved, replacing the prevailing paradigm of human dominance over nature and over humanity itself. This article combines theoretical frameworks, empirical evidence, and pedagogical practices with early childhood education to illustrate the potential of humane education in advancing active citizenship.

Keywords: Humane education; Active citizenship; Early childhood; Educational program.

1. Introduction

The 21st century is characterized by complex challenges such as climate change, social inequalities, political polarization, global crises, wars that demand citizens to be engaged, ethical, and compassionate. Citizens should not only be aware of local and global issues but should be characterized by participation in civic life, advocacy for social justice, and commitment to the common good. Citizens should be active so as to promote societal progress. A kind of education that integrates compassion, critical thinking, ethical reflection into learning and fosters citizenship is humane education. This article explores the relationship between humane education and active citizenship, pointing out how education through programs can prepare students from an early age to actively engage in societal issues. Based on theoretical perspectives and empirical studies, this paper showcases how humane education aligns with active citizenship in educational contexts presenting the outlines of an educational program for early childhood education.

2. Humane Education and Active Citizenship
2.1. Humane Education

Humane education is based on three pillars: knowledge of the needs of animals, empathy for them, and positive emotional connections and is defined as the teaching of compassion, respect, and empathy for all living beings (Gyllenhammar, 2015; Wagner, 2014). According to the Institute for Humane Education (n.d, a), humane education is both a field of study and an educational approach that integrates human rights, animal protection, and environmental sustainability. Its aim is to help students «put core values of kindness, empathy, generosity, responsibility, and integrity into practice and better prepares them to enter into a complex, globalized world as compassionate leaders and problem solvers rather than competitors» (ibid, n.p). It fosters empathy, compassion, knowledge, accurate understanding of specific needs, emotional experiences, direct engagement, emotional bonding, and a sense of responsibility toward animals (Hawkins and Williams, 2017). A key component of humane education is animal welfare education. Gyllenhammar (2015), argues that this educational domain serves as a guide for promoting humane behaviors and understanding not only animals' basic needs but also the impact of human actions on these needs. It facilitates the development of appropriate behaviors and skills for fostering positive interactions between humans and animals. Kelley (2024), supports that humane education focuses on fostering empathy and

ethical thinking in young children. How can it be implemented? «By equipping them with the emotional intelligence and moral foundation needed to make compassionate choices and positively impact their communities» (ibid:12). Rooted in principles of equity and justice, humane education encourages individuals to recognize and address the interconnectedness of social, environmental, and animal issues including the following four basic elements of humane education as Zoe Weil, the president and co-founder of the Institute for Humane Education reiterated:

- Providing accurate information about the pressing issues of our time so people have the *knowledge* they need to address global challenges.
- Fostering the 3 Cs of curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking so people have the *skills* they need to address challenges.
- Instilling the 3 Rs of reverence, respect, and responsibility, so people have the *will* to address challenges; and
- Providing positive choices and the tools for problem-solving, so people can *solve* challenges (Tobias, 2012).

To prepare people with the skills and experiences needed to become solution-driven, humane education specialists emphasize four key areas (Institute for Humane Education n.d, b):

- *Knowledge Acquisition*: Gaining a solid understanding of interconnected local and global issues and exploring their interdisciplinary relationships.
- *Critical and Creative Thinking*: Developing the ability to analyze the world deeply, think critically, and approach the future with strategic and innovative solutions.
- *Compassionate Decision-Making*: Cultivating a sense of wonder and appreciation for the natural world, empathy for all living beings, and a commitment to act responsibly and minimize harm.
- *Solution-Focused Engagement*: Identifying major global challenges, fostering opportunities for collaborative problem-solving, and designing and applying practical solutions.

According to the above, humane education plays a crucial role in fostering awareness and empathy toward animal welfare, environmental sustainability, and human rights, while shaping students into responsible and compassionate individuals. Central to this educational approach is the concept of animal sentience, which emphasizes the capacity of animals to experience emotions and perceive their environment (Kumar *et al.*, 2019). By cultivating an understanding of sentience, humane education encourages students to recognize animals as beings with unique needs and emotions, laying the foundation for promoting their welfare. Additionally, empathy- cognitive and affective- forms a critical aspect of this framework. Samuels and Onuoha-Jackson (2023):1, define that «cognitive empathy is the ability to accurately identify others' displayed emotions and affective empathy is the propensity to experience the same emotions one perceives in others». Empathy equips students to understand and share the experiences of others, including animals, fostering attitudes of care and advocacy. Compassion further extends empathy «when individuals realize to sympathize, spontaneously they will take part in reducing the others' burden. This is called compassion» (Juliadilla, 2020). Incorporating these principles into the curriculum enables students to make sound decisions and encourages them to foster respect for all forms of life. This educational perspective not only nurtures emotional bonds with animals but also promotes sustainability and collaborative efforts within communities. Furthermore, by embedding ethical values into the curriculum, students develop resilience against injustice, a heightened moral awareness, and the confidence to advocate for the welfare of others. These outcomes collectively cultivate individuals who are not only empathetic and compassionate but also prepared to engage constructively in addressing societal and environmental challenges (Pedersen, 2004).

2.2. Active Citizenship

Citizenship has become a central concept in sociology and political studies by Marshall (1950). Active citizenship involves participating in society in ways that promote democratic values, social justice, and the public good. It goes beyond voting or compliance with laws, emphasizing actions like advocacy, volunteering, and civic engagement (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004). Characteristics of active citizens include:

- *Civic Knowledge:* Understanding social, political, and environmental issues.
- *Empathy and Compassion:* Caring about the well-being of others.
- *Critical Thinking:* Analyzing societal problems and identifying solutions.
- *Agency:* Acting to address injustices and promote the common good.

Active citizenship involves engagement. Engagement can be either -citizens engaging with the state: electoral- or -citizens engaging with and among themselves: civic- (Annette, 2008). It is also conceptualized as a skill set and a disposition that education systems can cultivate (Hoskins and Mascherini, 2009). An active citizen is an individual who ensures a balanced and responsible daily life, remains informed about developments in the broader social context, and forms opinions through organized thinking (Council of Europe, 2023). Such a citizen actively engages in advocating for animal and environmental rights, strives to safeguard their own rights, accepts and values diversity at both local and global levels, and, above all, takes initiative and contributes to preventing undesirable conditions in society and in nature.

As a product of the educational process, the concept of the active citizen encompasses the following dimensions (Oxfam, 2015):

Familiarization with Key Concepts: Introducing students to critical terms such as sustainable development, social justice, inequality, and fairness.

Development of Skills: Equipping students with essential competencies, including rational thinking, extended discussion, dialogical abilities, and conflict resolution.

Personal Formation: Cultivating principles, perspectives, and proper conduct in students, such as respect for democratic governance and equality, contribution to society, and compassion.

The benefits of cultivating citizenship in students operate on two levels:

At the socio-political level, democracies rely on citizens who are aware of their obligations and rights, articulate their views, are active in their communities, and take responsibility for their actions.

At the school-personal level, an emphasis on citizenship fosters individuals with confidence, capable of facing challenges, raising their voices, and, through organized actions, advocating for their rights and the rights of others, thereby leaving a positive social impact for the benefit of the wider community (Kouraki and Vorylla, 2014).

What can the concept of citizenship mean for early childhood? Before children can feel like citizens of the world, they must first feel like citizens of their classroom (Kouraki and Vorylla, 2014):221-222.

Citizen of the Classroom → Citizen of the School Unit → Citizen of Society→ Citizen of the Country → Citizen of the European Area → Citizen of the Global Community

This means developing various sociocultural skills and values that facilitate coexistence and harmonious living, such as cooperation, adherence to rules, respect, tolerance for diversity, volunteerism, and solidarity. Drake (2001) presents citizenship as being based on the interconnectedness of membership, participation, rights, and responsibilities. By adapting these elements to early childhood, we can say that citizenship includes the following components:

Belong: Membership: the sense of belonging to a community.

Participate: Participation: the ability to take part in shaping developments.

Know and Exercise: Rights: awareness of them and exercise with respect, for my benefit and the benefit of others.

Commit: Responsibilities: the sense of duty toward the community.

Active citizenship, as a social practice, is intrinsically linked to education for active citizenship. Both are politically connected and implemented through pedagogical methods. This concept encompasses the following key characteristics:

- It is typically associated with young individuals.
- It aims to develop, enhance, and expand resources at individual, group, and community levels.
- It is carried out through collaboration and partnerships.
- It respects each individual's right to make their own choices and upholds their dignity.
- It is recognized as a fundamental right that safeguards the rights of all Council of Europe (2023).

2.3. Empirical Evidence

Humane education plays a transformative role in shaping active citizens by fostering empathy, critical thinking, and a commitment to social responsibility. Hawkins (2018), emphasized that teaching children kindness toward animals cultivates compassionate and ethical individuals who extend these values to their fellow humans. Ngai *et al.* (2021), highlighted humane education's potential to influence young people's attitudes and behaviors, encouraging them to adopt compassionate mindsets and take responsibility for protecting living beings. Research by (Arbour *et al.*, 2019) demonstrates that humane education promotes empathy, pro-social behaviors, and a sense of agency, empowering participants to address societal challenges such as environmental sustainability and social justice as it goes beyond a simple "treatment of animals" model (Arbour *et al.*, 2019). Smith and Parnell (2020), found that students who are exposed to humane education can demonstrate enhanced analytical abilities as they were more likely to propose innovative solutions to societal issues. Study conducted by Samuels *et al.* (2016) showed that it is valuable to develop empathy to students through humane education from an early age as it extends prosocial behavior and moral intelligence that can help them distinguish right or wrong. Moreover, Dally and Suggs (2010) showed the rewards of implementing humane education in schools as a teacher's response pointed out that after the implementation of humane education the students were more empathetic to each other and responsible for the animals they raise in the class.

All in all, humane education can equip students with skills and principles that are necessary to act as responsible citizens within complex contexts.

2.4. Curriculum Ideas and Educational Practice into Early Childhood Education

The foundations of humane education and active citizenship are rooted in constructivist and experiential learning theories, which assert that knowledge is constructed through experience and interaction with the environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Both humane education and active citizenship have as central aim to equip students with the analytical tools needed to address societal challenges effectively. Specifically, humane education can foster diverse educational possibilities to broaden children's knowledge and abilities for becoming responsible citizens of the globe. Incorporating principles of humane education into the curriculum should occur without any doubt (Pattnaik, 2023).

Designing humane education curricula requires schools to align their instructional goals with those proposed by organizations like the Institute for Humane Education while adapting them to their specific context. These goals can be implemented effectively through theme-based units and children's literature. Pedagogically, service-learning offers an ideal framework, combining academic study with community engagement. Through projects addressing

social and environmental issues, students gain practical skills, empathy, and a commitment to active citizenship (Eyler and Giles, 1999). The goals of humane education are not only educating:

"about" animals- means renewing a commitment to critically examining the portrayals of animals in EC settings- but also "for"- means engaging in conversations, discussions and experiences that allow children to begin to wrestle with their own developing sense of ethics, justice and care toward animals- and "with" animals- means seeking out affordances and encounters with animals, both free-living and domestic, recognizing that simply being with or in proximity to animals is valuable and important in its own right- (Born, 2018):52-53.

These goals align with a structured active citizenship project, which includes identifying an issue, conducting research, discussing options, planning and implementing actions, and assessing their outcomes (Jerome *et al.*, 2022). Such goals can be implemented by the use of interdisciplinary approaches. According to the above, the basic outlines of an Educational Program for Early Childhood Education are proposed (Ages 4–8): Humane Education and Active Citizenship (Table 1). As pertains to our methodological foundations, we base our activities on participatory/interactive learning methodologies purposefully selected to build students' understanding of and skills regarding aims of humane education (Bires and Schultz, 2014).

Table-1. Educational Program for Early Childhood Education about Humane Education and Active Citizenship

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Program Title: "Caring Citizens: Protecting Animals, Protecting Our Nature"
Program Learning Objectives

Cognitive Objectives
1. Identify appropriate ways to treat animals kindly and respectfully.
2. Distinguish between caring and harmful behaviors toward animals.
3. Recognize basic needs of animals, such as food, water, shelter, and care.
4. Analyze short videos to understand animal behaviors and their meanings.
5. Identify examples of animal abuse and understand its negative consequences.
6. Define key terms such as "rights" and "violation" in the context of animals.
7. Conclude that animals, like humans, have essential needs for survival and growth.

Skill Objectives
1. Decode the concept of a "stray" animal, understanding its causes and implications.
2. Interpret visual and auditory information about animals through interactive video playback.

Attitude Objectives
Emotional Domain
1. Acknowledge that animals' rights are often violated due to human actions.
2. Develop a willingness to support animal protection through concrete, age-appropriate actions cooperating with people from community.
Psychomotor Domain
1. Present the needs, characteristics, and risks associated with different animals.
2. Share personal stories, observations, and ideas related to animals in group discussions.
3. Engage in conversations about the equal value of animals and humans in the world.
4. Plan and carry out a simple project to benefit animals, such as creating posters to promote stray animal adoption.

Program Structure
Duration: 4 weeks (8 sessions, 2 sessions per week)
Overview

Week 1: Understanding Animals' Needs and Rights
Session 1: Introduction to Animals and Their Needs
- Activity: Students identify and discuss pictures of animals, highlighting what they need to live happily and healthily.
- Video: A short, animated story showing the daily life of a dog with a loving family and a stray dog.
Session 2: What Are Animal Rights?
- Activity: Read a simple illustrated story about a rescued stray animal to introduce the concept of animal rights.
- Class Discussion: Define "rights" and "violations" in relatable terms.
- Drawing: Children draw happy animals and share what makes them happy.

Week 2: Identifying and Addressing Harmful Behavior
Session 3: Good vs. Harmful Treatment of Animals
- Activity: Role-playing scenarios where students decide how to act kindly toward animals in various situations.
- Video Playback: Analyze a clip showing examples of both positive and harmful human-animal

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interactions.

Session 4: Recognizing Animal Abuse
- Discussion: Students share how they feel about scenes of animal mistreatment (age-appropriate examples).
- Activity: Create a "Kindness Chart" listing ways to help animals and avoid harm.

Week 3: Empathy and Active Support for Animals
Session 5: Building Empathy Through Stories
- Storytelling: Read a story about a child helping stray animals.
- Activity: Discuss how the characters felt and what actions they took to help animals.

Session 6: Practical Actions to Protect Animals
- Craft Activity: Make simple posters to encourage adopting stray animals or caring for pets.
- Role-Playing: Practice talking about the importance of protecting animals with others.

Week 4: Becoming Caring Citizens
Session 7: Understanding Stray Animals
- Video Playback: Watch a short documentary about stray animals and shelters.
- Activity: Discuss why animals might become stray and what people can do to help.

Session 8: Creating an Animal Care Initiative
- Group Project: Students design a class initiative, such as collecting supplies for a local animal shelter or creating an adoption-awareness campaign.
- Presentation: Students share their projects with the whole school community and reflect on what they've learned.

Assessment and Evaluation
1. Cognitive Objectives: Students complete a group chart identifying animals' needs and ways to meet them.
2. Skill Objectives: Students decode the concept of "stray animal" during discussions and role-playing activities.
3. Attitude Objectives: Students demonstrate empathy through reflective discussions, present their initiatives and action plan.

Expected Outcomes
By the end of the program, students will have developed a foundational understanding of humane treatment toward animals, essential skills for recognizing and addressing animal needs, and an empathetic attitude that supports active citizenship. They will have participated in a hands-on initiative promoting animal welfare, fostering their sense of responsibility.

3. Conclusion

In this concept paper, we tried to point out how humane education aligns with active citizenship in early childhood educational contexts. Humane education aims to promote knowledge of the needs of animals, empathy for them, and positive emotional connections by fostering active future citizens who care about animals and the natural environment. The commitment to living beings and environment is integral to the cultivation of active citizens so the intersection of humane education and active citizenship offers an educational framework able to equip students with characteristics that lead to form informed, compassionate, and engaged citizens. Generally, issues of citizenship play a central role in early childhood education, and engaging students with them can only have a positive impact (Pitsou and Theocharidi, 2024).

The question that arises is if the intersection of humane education and active citizenship is an easy endeavor in current educational contexts. According to Arbour *et al.* (2019) humane education faces several challenges as its institutional support is limited due to rigid curricula and inadequate teacher training. Both of them hinder its widespread adoption. Also, another challenge is the impact measurement of empathy and active citizenship so comprehensive evaluation frameworks should be developed (Smith and Parnell, 2020). Additionally, cultural and contextual differences may affect the applicability of active citizenship. So, it is important for related programs to meet local needs preserving the core principles of active citizenship approaches (Hoskins and Mascherini, 2009).

It is true that there are challenges, but policymakers should acknowledge the role of humane education in promoting active citizenship and allocate adequate resources to support its integration into existing curricula and equipping educators with the skills needed to deliver it effectively (Tate, 2011). Last but not least, it would also be interesting to examine the wider effect of humane education -scholars should prioritize longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term impact of humane education on active citizenship and societal outcomes.

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