The challenges and future development of animal welfare education in the UK

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Abstract

At present, UK schools are not required to teach children about animal welfare. This undoubtedly contributes to widespread deficiencies in knowledge, and misconceptions about animals’ needs, likes, and dislikes. Aware of the issues at hand, animal welfare organisations create their own materials for teachers to use, and/or deliver educational programmes directly to children and young people. As the design, content, processes and outcomes associated with these interventions are rarely documented publicly or systematically evaluated, there is little evidence to guide the development of animal welfare education. A three-stage online Delphi study was used to identify who current interventions target, what delivery methods are being used, and how expert practitioners describe priorities and challenges in the field. Thirty-one experts participated in Round 1, with 84% of the sample (n = 26) also taking part in Round 2. Qualitative analysis revealed passionate accounts about the far-reaching potential of educating children about animals. However, we also identified ambiguities and tensions that could thwart the future development of effective animal welfare education. Alongside the production of a web-based framework and evidence-based toolkit to support practitioners, findings will be used to encourage animal welfare professionals to work towards producing shared terminology, definitions, and outcomes’ frameworks; focusing on positive education and the idea of harm as opposed to cruelty. This should facilitate collaboration with schoolteachers and education policymakers to assess the ways in which animal welfare might be successfully incorporated within formal education in the future. These data suggest many potential avenues for inclusion, although a holistic approach emphasising the links between humans, animals and the environment, within the context of young people’s recent activism and contemporary health, societal and environmental issues, may be most successful.

Keywords: animal welfare, animal welfare education, children, cruelty prevention, Delphi, evaluation

Introduction

Education and prevention are significant parts of the work undertaken by animal welfare organisations. Many charities are operating with tight funding constraints, so intervention work is channelled into reaching as many children as possible through visits to schools or provision of resources that schools can access. Recently, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) has instigated a campaign calling on governments in England and Wales to include animal welfare in formal school education. There are similar calls to incorporate humane education (that incorporates understanding of, and empathy towards, animals) into school curricula in other countries (Chun Fung & Zhou 2020). At present, animal welfare is not a curricular requirement in the UK, and it is not clear if it is considered sufficiently important by teachers or educational policy-makers to warrant inclusion. Teachers may also feel ill equipped to teach in this area, especially in what may be perceived to be an already overloaded curriculum, with the added pressure to cover areas relevant to current societal, cultural and environmental crises (Borg et al 2012; Lasen et al 2017; Monroe et al 2019). They undoubtedly welcome expert visits to schools.

It is possible though that to those outside the animal welfare profession, animal welfare education (AWE) might be to some extent misunderstood. Often inherent in the providers’ name (society for the prevention of cruelty to animals), animal welfare organisations are inextricably linked with animal rescue/re-homing, prosecutions, and the more extreme forms of cruelty/abuse. Educators within the formal education system may not view animal welfare as a priority, especially if they feel it is irrelevant for the majority of schoolchildren or, more importantly, a sensitive topic. AWE may be viewed only in terms of the benefits for animals (not for people) and may not always be interpreted as having a positive focus. The idea of “Educating a kinder generation” (Royal Society for the