

The Role of Educators and Pets in the Classroom

By Eric Roscoe

There is very little to no doubt that the practice of keeping pets, or animals in general, provides numerous forms of enjoyment, purpose, and support. In the United States alone, pet ownership continues to increase drastically, with reptiles and amphibians (which are collectively known as herps, or herptiles) being perhaps the most rapidly growing and developing segments of the pet industry. In the year 2016 alone, it was estimated that Americans spent 62.75 billion dollars on their pets. Furthermore, according to the most recent (as of 2016) American Pet Product Association surveys, 95.5 million freshwater fish, 9.5 million saltwater fish, 9.3 million reptiles, and 12.4 million small animals were maintained in households. Animals are often seen as either members of the family, or otherwise important aspects to families, and there is certainly also no doubt that they play important and critical roles in the lives of many children, including school aged children, who often are naturally curious and drawn to many of these animals without the learned fears often developed or passed on later in their lives.

Indeed, there are numerous proven benefits and studies that show keeping and/or interacting with pets and animals has immensely positive and beneficial results towards developing greater empathy and social skills, improvement from animal assisted therapy, and many other areas of research. These findings thus often lead further to the presence and utilization of animals in classroom settings as ways of assisting children in thriving and interacting with their teachers and classmates while further developing their socio-emotional skills. As a result of utilizing one or more classroom pets, or incorporating them into a formal curriculum or lesson plan, a greater level of respect for both human and animal life can be gained, as well as greater senses of leadership and responsibility, stress and anxiety relief, furthered knowledge and exposure to science and nature studies, improved speech, language, reading, and/or writing, and oftentimes simply gaining new or positive opportunities, perspectives or experiences.

Furthermore, keeping pets in the classroom can often instill a greater sense of pride, cohesion, and inclusivity, particularly in situations where students or teachers do not, or cannot own pets of their own at home. According to the American Humane Association (AHA) Pets in the Classroom Phase 1 report in 2015, respondent teachers have stated "I feel that having a pet in the classroom makes the classroom a more welcoming environment for students and parents because the students love to

show off the pets at any given time." Furthermore, "kids who don't have pets at home can start to learn the responsibility of having one!"

Issues and Considerations with Classroom Pets

There are always certainly several issues and considerations any teacher or educator should be aware of prior to adopting, purchasing, or otherwise acquiring a classroom pet if they are interested in doing so. One of the first courses of action should certainly be to seek approval from the prospective teacher's or educator's school district or administrative office. Fortunately, a vast majority of school and educational districts recognize the benefits of the legitimate use of animals as educational tools in a school setting provided they do not cause public health, safety, and/or significant distractions from the children's regular schoolwork and routines. District policies may often vary from district to district, and some may be more restrictive than others. For example, the Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District disallows reptiles and amphibians in its classrooms beneath the level of 7th grade, likely due to reasons of salmonellosis and zoonotic disease transmission (which are diseases and pathogens which can be transferred from animals to humans). Therefore, if animals are allowed to be maintained in a classroom or other public educational setting, proper and basic hygienic and sanitation requirements associated with responsible pet care must always be followed and taught, particularly if children and students are permitted to handle and interact with any animals.

Additional challenges and considerations associated with classroom pets have also been identified, with the most common reasons being additional costs of maintaining the animals outside of district or other designated grant funding, care and accommodations for the animal(s) outside of regular school hours (such as weekends, holiday, and other extended school breaks and recesses), and properly managing the student's relations and interactions with the animals. These reported factors represent important considerations all teachers and educators must make prior to bringing an animal into their classrooms as part of the long term responsibilities of making the monitoring, ensuring, and caring for the animal's welfare and well-being among the top priorities.

Which species, or type of classroom pet that should be selected should also of course certainly be thoroughly and carefully researched prior to adopting or acquiring it as well. Many reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates, for example often have lower or easier care and maintenance requirements than many other animals such as birds or small mammals. These animals may only require weekly to bi-weekly feeding and cleaning, but at the same time, can often require specific temperatures, humidity, diets, housing and enclosures (preferably appropriate for the species or

genus, and be secure and escape proof), and other environmental requirements that must be met in order for them to be maintained in captivity. The animal's full grown size potential should also be considered as to whether it makes an appropriate choice as a classroom pet. Medically significant venomous reptiles and other venomous animals are obviously not recommended choices for classroom pets, and require significant knowledge and experience to be able to be safely kept and worked with, and are often disallowed under school district policies regardless. Some species which can be popular as pets, such as green iguanas, crocodilians, and aquatic turtles, can also become large, and difficult to house, re-home or adopt out due to the overpopulation of some of these species if they no longer become wanted or suitable for the classroom. Some of the more suitable and appropriate species of classroom reptiles and amphibians which may be considered can include leopard geckos, fire-bellied toads, bearded dragons, blue tongued skinks, corn snakes, kingsnakes or milksnakes, ball pythons, garter snakes, small European tortoise species (such as Russian, Hermann's and Greek tortoises), White's treefrogs, and many other smaller species of lizards and snakes. Many amphibians can also make for great viewing pets or classroom animals, but most are rather delicate and sensitive animals with permeable skins, making them better for display rather than frequent handling. Invertebrate species which can be considered for the classroom for older students can include several species of docile, slower moving new world tarantulas, Madagascar hissing cockroaches, or many of the large millipedes. Some insect and other invertebrate species, such as walkingsticks or stick insects, may also require USDA (United States Department of Agriculture)-APHIS permits in order to possess and sell, and are unlawful without them due to these species becoming potentially destructive ecological pests if released or escaped.

Benefits of Classroom Pets and the Curriculum

When it comes to classroom pets, there are a wide array of uses and applications these animals serve, both formally and/or informally. Although a large majority of teachers and other educators who use animals in a classroom setting have responded to the AHA Phase 1 survey that the animal is there to interact with, but involves no formal teaching plan (approximately 60%, or 59.9% of respondents) or interactions with the animal(s) are used as rewards for good behavior and academic achievement (56.1%), another 49% polled indicate that animals are incorporated into formal or informal curriculum and lesson plans. In addition, nearly 80% of survey respondents also indicated an "other" category when it comes to their lesson plans and pets. Further elaborating on this, pets were used in non-fiction and technical writing (including grammar and research applications), speech, language, and communication therapy or lessons, reading, democracy (such as voting on the pet's name), and methods of inquiry.

Perhaps by far the most common and widespread use and benefit of classroom pets was to build and encourage a greater sense of responsibility and leadership. Aspects of animal husbandry, including feeding, cleaning, and enrichment greatly promote the area of care and responsibility for all living things. Oftentimes, teachers and students alike are placed on designated and regular, or otherwise rotating daily or weekly care which in turn amplifies teaching practical life skills and responsible pet care and sense of ownership. Another widely cited reason for the benefits of classroom pets is that these animals provide an additional source of relaxation, stress, and anxiety relief. For example, watching classroom fish has been reported to be "a great change of pace from electronics and the busy lives most kids experience." Furthermore, classroom pets can provide opportunities for students to de-escalate, as well as to address ASD, behavioral, and/or learning differences in the classroom as well.

Another wide benefit to utilizing pets to the classroom is certainly its ability to bring and provide science and nature based studies and lessons to students. Classroom pets can, in numerous ways, promote and serve as leading examples of many different scientific concepts, habitats and natural history, ecosystems, climate and environmental education, life cycles and genetics, to reproduction, adaptations, and animal behavior. The ways in which animals were used to teach about scientific concepts are just as varied, if not more so. One example can include teaching hands on about the animal's dream homes as part of units on habitats, while older students can also keep and maintain daily or regular logs of their observations, as well as learning how to take measurements in a wide variety of areas. Animals were also very frequently utilized in reading and writing lesson plans as well, otherwise known as the language arts. "The children love reading to our bearded dragon. He cocks his head as if he is actually listening to them read and it improves their reading fluency by reading aloud to him" report several teachers surveyed. Teachers who use animals in the classroom also report that they are very helpful in facilitating writing interest and ability among children as well. These forms of writing can be as varied as technical or scientific reports on the animals, to creative stories, letter writing, story-telling, and poetry and journals about the classroom pet, or animals in general. As another example, pets have been used in at least some cases to serve as prompters in student pen pal letters, both to other children with similar animals, or even to the animal itself!

There are yet even more benefits to classroom pets that can be elaborated upon as well. Yet another example is being able to instill a much greater sense of empathy, compassion, tolerance, and respect for others. Teachers have further reported that having pets is an invaluable aid for helping children

gain pride, and unconditional friendship through or with the classroom pet, and that they are just as much a part of their communities as their family and friends. In fact, many classroom pet lesson plans have been developed centered around topics such as sympathy, empathy, and responsibility, care and compassion for all living things, character lessons, and stop bullying! Finally, another major aspect to utilizing classroom pets is that they oftentimes expose teachers and children alike to many new experiences and opportunities they may not otherwise do so. Concepts such as life cycles and life and death can also be gained through experience with a classroom pet, including teaching that it is ok and perfectly normal to feel sad or grieve over death or loss without fear of judgement. Several teachers have reported these new experiences with animals which may be traditionally viewed as unpopular, which go a long way towards helping reduce biases and unfounded fears, as well as helping students overcome pre-conceived fears and misinformation. These powerful lessons of course have the potential of wider applications and context in the way children may view those who may be different from themselves throughout their lives.

The Role of Herpetological Societies, Educators, and Rescues

Local, state, or regional herpetological societies, as well as other individuals, educators, and rescue community organizations involved with reptiles, amphibians, and other animals can play several different very important additional or supplemental roles and resources in promoting responsible pet ownership in the classroom. Children, students, and teachers alike can become involved in their local or area herpetological society by conducting searches on a number of different online websites and resources, such as The Reptile Report and Reptiles Magazine, which provide regional and state directories of herp societies in their areas to join or become involved with. Indeed, by doing so in a collaborative student-teacher classroom setting, children can certainly gain additional knowledge and literacy in knowing how to conduct research into many other areas of their work and study throughout their lives. And if there is not currently a herpetological society in a given area, the many unifying aspects of classroom pets can certainly serve as a strong and invaluable starting point for teachers, administration, other faculty, and students to work together collaboratively towards forming one of their own. Furthermore, kid's herpetological societies, which are child and student friendly sub-sections of either several existing herp societies, or are aspects that can be used to incorporate children and students into one, and who may otherwise be too young to normally coordinate or run them themselves are another great way of furthering the mission and purpose of educating enthusiasts and the general public alike about misunderstood reptiles and amphibians, and promoting education, conservation, and expertise in other relevant areas.

Herpetological societies, educators, and pet and animal rescue organizations can also play an active role in supporting the concept and practice of pets in the classroom by acting as valuable resources for animal care and placement if or when an animal is no longer suitable, appropriate, or wanted for the classroom. These types of community relationships between schools, teachers, herp societies, and rescue groups can often help mitigate or break down many of the traditional concerns regarding pets in the classroom. The Madison Area Herpetological Society (or MAHS), for example, is just one of many such community organizations that are able to re-home and provide foster and rescue networks and connections for unwanted animals, including classroom pets. Some individuals and organizations also provide animals to classrooms on temporary loans, basis's, or exchange programs, in which the animal(s) are returned to these sources whenever deemed necessary or appropriate in order to reduce the full, long term care, expenses, and commitment animals require. With all of these resources, organizations, and information available at both student's and teacher's fingertips alike, it is the hope that the responsible and ethical use of pets in classrooms only continues to increase and develop to become much more responsible and educated than previously before.

Pets in the Classroom Resources:

1. Pets in the Classroom, which offers grants and fundraising towards maintaining pets in classrooms: [Education Grants - Pets in the Classroom](#)
2. Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council's (PIJAC) Habitattitude program preventing the release of unwanted, nonnative species, while also promoting the concept of pets in classrooms: [Habitattitude: Do right by your pet. Do right by our environment. | PIJAC](#)

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