THE HUMANE EDUCATION TRUST
CAPE TOWN SOUTH AFRICA

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Louise van der Merwe

is honoured to have been appointed an

Honorary Fellow of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics

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Vaccinate against Violence

Synopsis of a presentation to the

Animal Welfare Summit

held by the Western Cape Government

at Percheron Hall, Elsenburg

on 16 September 2026.

Why Humane education belongs in every classroom, every day, for every learner

A WORLD IN TRANSITION

One of the great questions of the AI age is surely this:

If machines can increasingly do what human beings do, what will distinguish us from the machines?



Andreas Schleicher, Director for Education and Skills at the international Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), has warned of the danger of educating young people to become, in effect, **"second-class robots" rather than first-class humans.**

That is a huge challenge to education.

WHAT HELPS MAKE A FIRST-CLASS HUMAN?



Professor Simon Baron-Cohen,
Professor of Developmental Psychopathology
at the University of Cambridge, puts our capacity
for empathy — both innate and learned —
right at the top of the list.

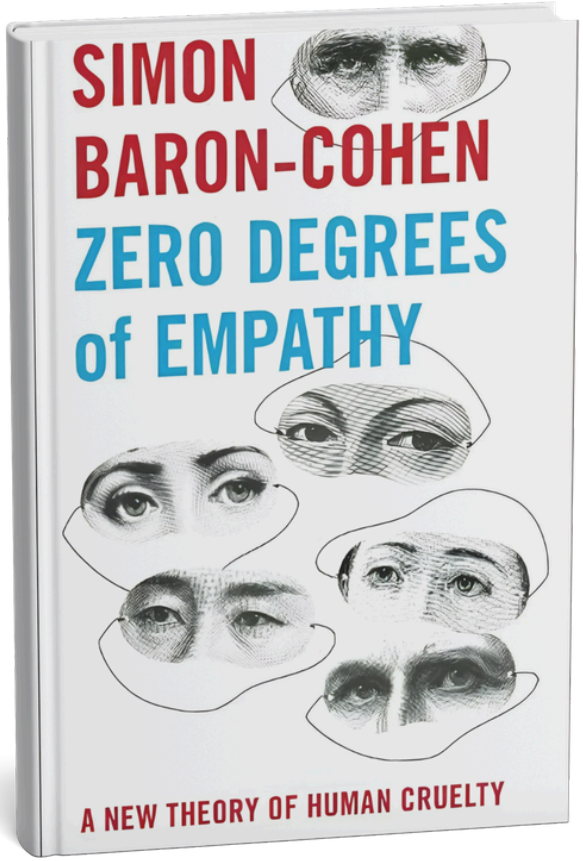
He says:

> *With empathy we have a resource to resolve confiict, increase community cohesion and dissolve another person's pain...*
> *The erosion of empathy is a critical global issue of our time.*

PSYCHOLOGY PROFESSOR SIMON BARON-COHEN

In his book *Zero Degrees of Empathy*, he makes this observation:

> *Despite its importance to human relationships and society, empathy figures hardly at all in school curricula...*
> *We just assume empathy will develop in every child, come what may. We put little time, effort or money into nurturing it...*
> *Our politicians almost never mention it...*
> *We need to realise what a powerful resource we have — at our very fingertips — if only we prioritise it.*



THE VALUE OF HUMANE EDUCATION

Humane education deliberately cultivates a child's capacity to recognise the feelings, needs and perspectives of others — including those who are vulnerable and entirely dependent upon our choices — like the animals. This lies at the heart of empathy.

A 35-YEAR JOURNEY

THE HUMANE EDUCATION TRUST
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The Humane Education Trust was founded in 1991 with a simple conviction:

If we want a kinder society, we have to help children learn kindness.

For 35 years, The Humane Education Trust has worked to bring humane education into South African classrooms.



Thirty-four of our educational resources have received approval from education authorities, and our materials have occasionally been purchased in support of Learning and Teaching Support Material initiatives.

But humane education has never received the systemic support that would enable it to reach children across South Africa or even across our province itself. What reach we have achieved has largely been one school at a time. Since 2022 approximately 6,000 learners have benefited from our resources.
We are immensely grateful to every teacher who has responded to our call.

But 6,000 children in four years is a drop in the ocean.
And what makes that particularly frustrating is that we already have evidence of **what can happen when humane education is given a genuine opportunity.**



WE KNOW HUMANE EDUCATION WORKS!

In 2001, our humane education programme for Grade 9 learners within the Safe Schools context, was warmly received by the then head of Safe Schools, Eugene Daniels.
He said:



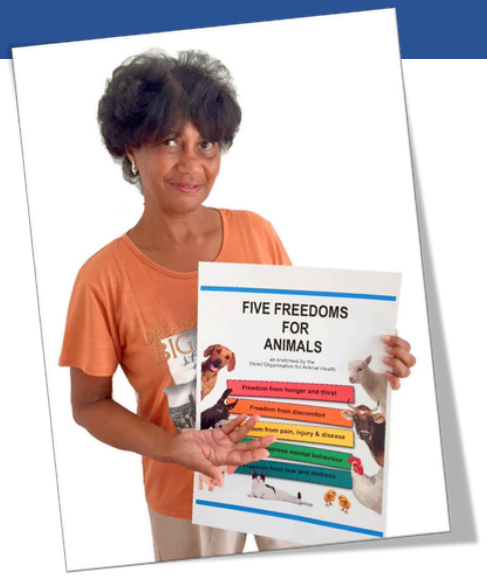
> *"Our Safe Schools programme is not only about the elimination of crime and violence in the school environment. It's about values. You can't actually address crime and violence unless you look into the hearts and minds of people."*

In 2012, our humane education programme with a Grade 7 class at Golden Grove Primary School coincided with a remarkable 20% improvement in Life Orientation results. The school's then principal, Tony Austen, credited our programme as an important contributor.
He said:



> *"In the months that learners in Grade 7HS received humane education every week, their marks for Life Orientation improved by a full 20% which reflects their amazingly improved ability to express themselves, to read, write and discuss issues intelligently, and to think creatively. What humane education achieved for these learners is remarkable."*

WE KNOW HUMANE EDUCATION WORKS!



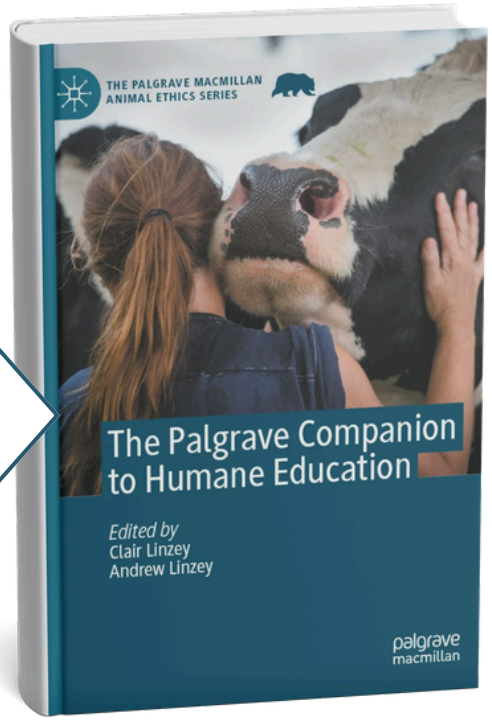
Then, in 2018, came one of the most significant chapters in our history. At Forest Heights Primary School in Eerste River, we piloted humane education with Grade 3 learners to explore its impact on children's attitudes and behaviour over a period of a year.

The results were so encouraging that this seemingly obscure South African classroom project has now become part of **international academic literature on humane education.**

The Forest Heights work is included in

The Palgrave Companion to Humane Education,

the first international academic resource devoted to the field of humane education, edited by Reverend Professor Andrew Linzey and Dr Clair Linzey at the *Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics*, and published in September 2026.



Buy your own E-copy or hardcover here

It is a great honour that this resource is dedicated to the work of The Humane Education Trust at Forest Heights Primary School and earned Louise van der Merwe a fellowship with the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics.

THE WORLD HAS TAKEN AN HISTORIC STEP FORWARD!

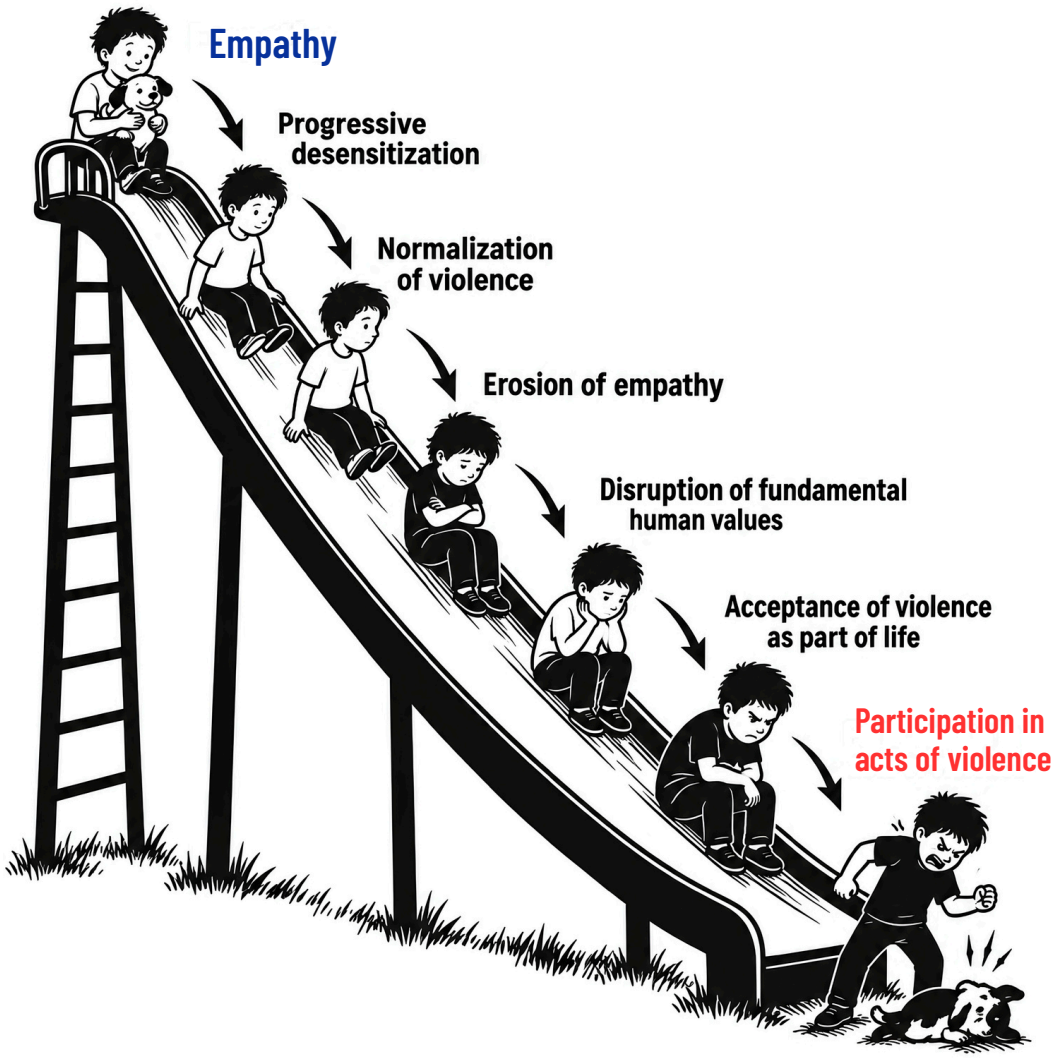
In 2023, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child issued General Comment No. 26 on children's rights and the environment.

Paragraph 35 specifically calls for children to be protected from exposure to violence — including violence inflicted on animals.

Animal welfare has entered the international child-rights domain.
Why?

Because violence — including violence on animals — affects the psycological development of our children.

THE SLIPPERY SLIDE:
WHAT HAPPENS WHEN INNATE EMPATHY IS REPEATEDLY EXPOSED TO VIOLENCE



STUDENT SURVEY INSIGHTS

In 2025, Louise van der Merwe was given the opportunity to address first year Sociology students at the University of the Western Cape. She made particular reference to the topic of Animal Sentience.

She was taken aback by the students' responses...

74% reported that they had matriculated with no knowledge of the concept of animal sentience.

100% believed that animal sentience should be taught at high-school level.

This should give us pause for thought and action!

Understanding the concept of sentience matters profoundly because how can we expect our learners to have a sense of compassion, care, respect and justice towards those at our mercy if they do not understand?

The child who understands sentience has taken an enormously important step.
The child has begun to see the world through another's eyes.

And this is empathy.

LIFE SKILLS AND LIFE ORIENTATION

Humane education does not need to become another subject in an already crowded curriculum.

Topics that promote humane education are already embedded within Life Skills and Life Orientation.

For example the topic *'Development of the Self'* which occurs throughout the curriculum, cannot be meaningfully achieved without humane education.

Perhaps the most eloquent testimony comes from a Grade 9 learner in Belhar:

> *"In what other subject do you learn to care?*
> *Humane education has made me into a better person."*

VACCINATE SOCIETY AGAINST VIOLENCE...

Please make humane education an integral part of everyday learning in every school

- We are not asking the Western Cape Government to begin something from scratch.
- The work has been done.
- The resources exist.
- They have been tested in classrooms.
- Teachers have used them.
- Children have responded.
- And the international educational and child-rights landscape is moving increasingly towards the principles on which this work has been built.

What we need now is political will to take humane education into the main stream, to help preserve, transfer and scale 35 years of education experience so it can belong to the next generation — a generation where the right of every child is to be Proudly Human.

I thank you.

Please help build a kinder world...

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IT IS BUILT BY PEOPLE WHO CARE ENOUGH TO HELP CREATE IT.

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5. Search for Humane Education and select.

WE THANK YOU.



Please help reach as wide an audience as possible by forwarding this presentation

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