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HIDDEN LIFE OF FARMED ANIMALS – THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AS A CHANGE MAKER

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Abstract

There is a lot of evidence that the living conditions or consciousness of farmed animals do not belong to common knowledge. Several studies demonstrate unawareness of these issues even among highly educated adult population, which is understandable because these topics are usually not discussed in schools at any level. The treatment of farmed animals is not only an ethical question, because it has impact also on climate change, environment, food and water supply, health and well-being, and equality.

There is no time to start changing the education from day-care and primary schools, but education has to be able to wake up the young people in secondary and higher education as soon as possible. According to the latest IPCC report 2018, we have only 12 years to make changes to restrain the climate change remarkably. Farmed animals play a crucial role in the climate change and environmental questions, and therefore it essential to include the topic also in educational discussion and education development. Additionally, intensive animal production is extremely topical because of increased circulation of animal-based viruses.

This paper aims to discuss the role of higher education as a change maker in awareness of consciousness and treatment of farmed animals. It is not only the responsibility of legislation or political decision-making but of higher education too to make the agriculture and food system more sustainable and ethically acceptable by providing respective knowledge, skills and attitudes. Higher education and curricula there have a huge potential both conceptually and politically by forwarding values, attitudes and ways of thinking, but still, these topics are usually neglected or ignored. This paper describes how this topic is neglected in higher education and provides ideas how to bring it to curricula and educational practices and processes. The methods used focus on literature review, participatory observation, analyses of curricula, and a student survey.

The finding is that farmed animals are not discussed in any ethical context in higher education, but they should be, and that higher education needs to develop students' knowledge, skills and attitudes to take into account the nature and other living beings including farmed animals. The conclusion is that by paying attention to other living beings in educational values and by renewing structures, processes and curriculum work in education, we can get new relevant tools to build a more sustainable society and future for all species including farmed animals.

Keywords: Higher education, curricula, education development, ethics, farmed animals, animal production.

1 INTRODUCTION

Many people do not know how farmed animals are treated, or that also farmed animals have feelings of pain, sorrow or joy, just like us. In other words, the living conditions or consciousness of farmed animals do not belong to common knowledge. Several studies show unawareness even among the highly educated adult population about the living conditions of farmed animals, conflicts between their consciousness and treatment, or the impacts of animal-based food production on the environment or societal structures ([1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6]). According to Eurobarometer, nine out of ten EU citizens think that the EU should do more to increase the awareness of farmed animals and their treatment. In the EU countries, there is a growing concern about animal welfare. For example, big changes have taken place in Finland, where over 90 % think that farmed animals should be treated better than it is done nowadays. ([7]). Despite of the general concern, the knowledge level of the life of farmed animals is incomplete. For example, people are often unaware what tie-stall cattle barns or farrowing crates mean in practice, or what dairy production means for a dairy cow (the separation of calves from their mothers within the first 24 hours after birth, year after year, ending with the slaughter of the mother cow at a young age when the milk production lowers). These topics are not usually discussed in schools at any educational level.

The treatment of farmed animals is not only an ethical question, because it has impact also on climate change, environment, food and water supply, health and well-being, and equality. Despite research results and scientific evidence, alarming climate changes, IPCC (International Panel on Climate Change, [8]) reports etc., our current lifestyle is strongly based on the utilization of natural resources and animals, and still seen as acceptable. This tradition of animal production for human purposes, often called the meat norm, allows us to use animals as a means of production, food, entertainment and clothing. A society based on the meat norm is ethically and ecologically unsustainable, and thus meat and other animal-based food consumption can no longer be considered citizens' private issue but can be considered a fact that threatens the continuity of life and the future of the whole planet. Avoiding meat and dairy products is the single biggest way to reduce one's environmental impact on the planet; without meat and dairy consumption, global farmland use could be reduced by more than 75% and still feed the world ([9]).

A plant-based diet is closely connected to climate change and to health issues; a global switch to plant-based diets could save up to eight million lives by 2050, reduce greenhouse gas emissions by two thirds and lead to healthcare-related savings. It could also avoid climate-related damages of US\$1.5 trillion ([10]). We can neither ignore the topical role of animal production because of increased circulation of animal-based viruses, such as COVID-19 ([11], [12], [13]).

There is no time to start changing the education from day-care and primary schools to include these topics. Education has to be able to wake up especially the young people in secondary and higher education as soon as possible. Students there will be actors and decision-makers of the society and businesses of tomorrow, and education should provide them with knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for sustainable and ethical decision-making. According to the latest IPCC report ([8]), we have now about 8-10 years left to make changes to restrain the climate change remarkably. Farmed animals play a crucial role in the climate change and environmental questions, and therefore it essential to include the topic also in educational discussion and education development.

This study aims to discuss the role of higher education as a change maker in awareness of consciousness and treatment of farmed animals. It is not only the responsibility of legislation or political decision-making but of higher education too to make the agriculture and food system more sustainable and ethically acceptable by providing respective knowledge, skills and attitudes. Higher education and curricula there have a huge potential both conceptually and politically by forwarding values, attitudes and ways of thinking. The aim is to describe how this topic is ignored or neglected in higher education and provide ideas how to bring it to curricula and educational practices and processes.

2 METHODOLOGY

Pedagogical discussion in European higher education has traditionally been based on humanism. However, science has taken huge steps forward, and posthumanistic approach can be considered as a more realistic and sustainable framework in relation to the current and future worlds. This article is based on posthumanism, originating from humanism. The difference between these approaches lies on that posthumanism sees human beings as a part of nature and nature must be considered in all actions; human beings have no right to destroy nature or set themselves above it in ethical considerations. ([14], [6]) The posthumanistic viewpoint focuses here on farmed animals and it is examined in the context of education and learning. This refers to that how our knowledge and understanding of farmed animals should be considered in education and from learning viewpoint.

The methods used focus on analyses of curricula and a student survey conducted at Finnish universities of applied sciences, participatory observation, and literature review. The study material examines the learning contents on animal issues primarily in higher education and in the educational continuum too. With animals issues it is referred here to knowledge on animals (animals having consciousness and feelings), animal protection (animal treatment) and animal rights (animals having an intrinsic value). The methods used focus on analyses of curricula in Finnish higher education, a student survey conducted at a Finnish university of applied sciences, participatory observation, and literature reviews.

The curricula in all degree programmes at three universities of applied sciences in Finland were studied year 2018 covering the study fields of engineering, business and administration, health and wellbeing, and arts and culture. A more in-depth study was conducted for the year 2012, covering all degree programmes (N = 101) in the study field of social sciences, business and administration

leading to a BBA (bachelor of business administration) degree in Finland. The survey (n=140) was conducted among engineering and business students at Turku University of Applied Sciences in Finland in 2018.

3 RESULTS

The content and discourse analyses of mentioned curricula at Finnish universities of applied sciences do not mention topics such as farmed animals and their living conditions, treatment or consciousness; animal rights; the impacts of animal-based food production etc. The curricula in all degree programmes at three universities of applied sciences in Finland were studied for the year 2018 and these topics were totally absent in all study fields (covering engineering, business and administration, health and wellbeing, and arts and culture). A more in-depth study was conducted for the year 2012, covering all degree programmes (N = 101) in the study field of social sciences, business and administration leading to a BBA (bachelor of business administration) degree in Finland. The primary objective of this research was to examine whether there were environmental issues in the curricula, and the research findings revealed the relatively weak position of these issues in business education at the Finnish universities of applied sciences. This research material also indicated the total absence of animal questions in these curricula. The content and discourse analyses of the curricula studied not only the contents of courses and the study units offered but also the programme descriptions in order to examine the value basis behind these degree programmes. There were only two degree programmes out of 101 that mentioned that sustainable development and ethical issues were mainstreamed in the studies, and only one degree programme especially emphasised ethical and responsibility perspectives in all their studies ([15]). In all, the humanistic approach is strong in studied curricula, the role of posthumanism being very weak, the curricula covering environmental issues to some extent but ignoring animal issues completely.

The survey among Finnish UAS students (N=140) showed that animal issues related to farmed animals had not been discussed at any school level of participating students. In Finland, the absence of animal farming issues seems to be common on all educational levels. The curricula in upper secondary education sometimes offer some elective courses covering topics such as environmental issues and animal protection, but in vocational education, these topics are included only occasionally at the initiatives of individual teachers, but usually they are not covered at all. In Finnish primary education topics related to sustainable development are included in the new curricula, but animal protection is only mentioned briefly in the contents of the last course in biology on the ninth class. Considering all this, the unawareness about animal questions described earlier is not surprising, even among the adult and/or highly educated population in Finland. The invisibility of farmed animals seems to be a norm in the educational continuum. The situation does not look different outside Finland. For example, the research results demonstrate that a third of British children do not know where milk comes from and one in five believe milk comes straight from the fridge or supermarket ([16]). More than a third of British young adults do not know bacon comes from pigs or butter from a dairy cow ([17]).

It is not only the curricula but also everyday practices in (higher) education institutions, which are very traditional and ignore the questions related to farmed animals. For example, ways of thinking such as specism/speciesism (defining the value or rights of beings on the basis of the species one belongs to) or carnism (the culture-based classification of animals into eatable and non-eatable) are usually not discussed or questioned, as seen e.g. in university food services or school meals.

Unawareness about farmed animals is common in Europe in general also according to the literature review ([1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [18], [19]). The situation is understandable because these topics are usually not discussed in schools at any level. The attitudes and habits, which are harmful for the climate and nature including animals, are transferred from not only families to children but also from education. Educational institutions educate children and young people mainly according to working life needs and expectations, which are usually based on market economy requirements. ([20], [21])

4 CONCLUSIONS

Animal farming has diverse impacts e.g. ethically, environmentally, and on food and water supply, and therefore it should have a visible role in education and in curricula. In order to make the change, i.e. to increase and develop awareness of animal farming and farmed animals and thus strive towards a sustainable future, higher education needs to develop students' knowledge, skills and attitudes to take

into account the nature and other living beings including farmed animals. Education on animal welfare also has the potential to spur the development of empathy, which is believed to be the critical element often missing in society today and the underlying reason for neglectful and violent behaviour. Animal welfare education must ensure that the studies have the desired effect: a positive influence on people's knowledge of, attitudes about, and behaviour toward animals.

The significant first steps in higher education institutions could be discussion among the staff in higher education institutions on the necessity for change, management commitment and strategic decision-making towards posthumanistic approach, staff training (especially teaching staff), and embedding the topic in curricula.

Curricula have an enormous potential, both conceptually and politically, to forward values, attitudes and ways of thinking, and that is why changes in curricula are crucial. Curriculum development involves changes in curricula content, methods, assessment, and in staff and student involvement. The content should be able to provide the knowledge and understanding on animal farming, the topic which is currently missing. For example, basic facts of consciousness and treatment of farmed animals could be included in curricula by mainstreaming, in other words by integrating these topics in applicable studies (e.g. [22], [15]).

The methods by which the content is conducted should support learning. It is not enough to provide data – learning methods and environments to generate real learning must also be activated, for example, via the problem-solving of real cases in cross-disciplinary student teams or experiential learning methods. When learners can perform a task, go through the real experience, participate and act and discuss their experiences with each other, they learn best. For example, when improving awareness of food origins and the treatment of farmed animals, additional pedagogical tools to lectures and printed material (such as videos and virtual glasses) have successfully been used by animal protection organizations. The authentic learning methods are often difficult to organize, such as visits to animal farms, chicken yards and slaughterhouses or getting acquainted with individual animals. The content and methods together should help learners become aware of their place in the society and environment striving to guide learners in their own decision-making and to make them aware of the consequences that their decisions may have. Teaching and learning will then focus on critical thinking, creative problem solving and constructive procedures for posthumanistic themes instead of specific theories and methods. ([22], [15])

The first practical steps can focus on the change process of values and competences among the teaching staff. Teachers need to know facts about animal research on animal consciousness and treatment etc. and therefore further training is useful, as is including these topics in teacher training. The Internet being a popular information source for young people everywhere, is it important that teachers of all school levels are armed with the correct information and are able to help students to decipher between fact and fake information.

It has been discussed briefly here some practical steps on how to make the change in higher education and involve the posthumanistic viewpoint including animal issues there. All these steps could be explored in more detail. However, the aim here is to wake up discussion how to start to make improvements to the current situation that ignores or neglects posthumanism and animal issues in educational contents, policies and decision-making.

By paying attention to other living beings in educational values and contents, and by renewing structures, processes and curriculum work in education, we can get new relevant tools to build a more sustainable society and future for all species including farmed animals.

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