



To Approach Animal Rights in Primary School: a Challenge in Science Education

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Abstract

The present case study was based on the will to address the issue of Animal Rights in Primary School within the scope of Science Education. The study was based on the following questions: How to develop the awareness about animal rights in children? How does this approach contribute to develop their critical and reflective thinking?

The study involved 20 children of the 2nd year of schooling, aged 7 to 8 years old. Since their reading competence was still under development, this fact determined the methodological options. Thus, the children were interviewed one by one in two different moments, intercalated by an intervention plan focused on the Animal Rights issue. The interview consisted of showing a set of images in which the right of the animals was respected in some cases and violated in some others. Before questioning them about this aspect, each child had to describe what he/she saw in the image, to check the understanding of the message expressed in each photo. The intervention plan included the following themes: i) the concept of rights, through the confrontation between children's rights and animal rights; ii) the approach of the Declaration of Animal Rights; iii) the approach of two situations where animal rights were not respected: shows with aquatic mammals and animals in the circus. The themes were debated in class, and the teacher played the role of moderator of the discussions.

In the second interview, after the intervention, the majority of the children were able to analyze the situations present in the images in a more critical way, using a greater number of arguments than in the first interview. However, this occurred not only with the situations that were approached in class during the intervention plan. They have also increased their understanding about a greater number of situations where animal rights are violated. Overall, children were able to identify the majority of the situations in which their well-being was being affected. Therefore, the present study can be an influential example for other approaches in other educational contexts concerning the subject under discussion.

Keywords: *Animal Rights, Primary School, Science Education, Critical Thinking.*

1. Introduction

This study arose within the scope of supervised teaching practice, which took place in a primary school of Lisbon with a group of pupils of the 2nd year of schooling. During the observation period of the group, before the intervention, it was found that the pupils were not stimulated to develop their critical thinking. Simultaneously, they had a great curiosity about animals' issue. Thus, the following problem questions were defined:

How to develop the awareness about animal rights in children?

How does this approach contribute to develop their critical and reflective thinking?

In order to answer these questions several activities were designed concerning the Animal Rights issue. To allow the understanding of the concept of "having rights", a comparison with Children's Rights was the option.

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2. Animal Rights

The recognition that all human beings have equal rights is a recent development in the history of mankind. One of the most relevant steps in this recognition was the abolition of slavery in some countries in the late eighteenth century. The Animal Rights issue is historically much more recent and in the Western world animals were seen for centuries as beings without rights. For instance, Descartes (1596-1650) claimed that animals can not reason or feel pain and were automata like mechanical robots, which were reasons for excluding them from any right ([1] Galvão, 2010). Kant (1724-1804) had a more moderate position concerning animals. He divided them into irrational and rational ones, the former having a mere instrumental value and not an intrinsic one, being means for human ends. On the contrary, the latter were ends in themselves ([2] Kant, 1995). However, Kant argues that this difference does not justify acts of gratuitous cruelty over animals, but cruelty can be justified in the face of a higher purpose (e. g., the use of animals in experiments is a laudable end). Therefore, free cruelty is unjustifiable, mainly because it reveals the character of those who practice it.

In the last decades, this instrumental view of animals has been called into question. And the perspective of the Animal Rights comes to break with the ideas of some marks of the Western thought. Thus [3] Regan (2001) argues that intrinsic value must also be extended to animals, which forces to establish certain moral obligations towards them.

The concept Animal Rights, according to [4] Gomes (2015), also brings a legal dimension and requires the definition of a set of norms relating to certain activities in which animals are involved.

However, for Regan, the idea that animals have rights does not properly cover all living beings included in the Animal Kingdom and is focused on those he considered to be "subject-of-a-life".

To be subject-of-a-life is... [to] have beliefs and desires; perception, memory and a sense of the future, including their own future; an emotional life together with feelings of pleasure and pain; preference and welfare interests; the ability to initiate action in pursuit of their desires or goals; a psychophysical identity over time; and a individual welfare in the sense that their experiential life fares well or ill for them, logically independently of their utility for others and logically independent of their being the object of anyone else's interests. ([5] Regan 1983, 243)

Despite some inaccuracy, Regan's criterion seems to contemplate mammals and birds. His definition also seems to fit perfectly into a good part of the principles of the [6] Universal declaration of animal rights (1978). In fact, if some of its principles can fit into any animal life form, others are more clearly related to the more complex life forms like the following: "Animals of species living traditionally in a human environment have the right to live and grow at the rhythm and under the conditions of life and freedom peculiar to their species".

Considering that the approach in an educational context does not necessarily have to be confined to the taxonomic groups referred, it should be pointed out that the exemplification of human acts, disrespecting or protecting animal rights, can be more easily understood by pupils when involving precisely mammals and birds, an option also included in the present study.

3. Methodology

The study followed an action-research methodology, in terms of its purpose, since it started from the analysis of a problem situation with the purpose of its resolution, aiming, simultaneously, to improve the quality of the teaching practice process ([7] Coutinho et al. al., 2009). It had a predominantly qualitative approach, in terms of its method, trying to interpret pupils' ideas without intending to generalize the results, but simply to account for a particular dynamics that may be of / interest of others ([8] Coutinho, 2011).

The study involved 20 pupils (13 female) of the 2nd year of schooling, aged 7 to 8 years old. The pupils were interviewed in two different moments separated by a set of sessions focused on the Animal Rights issue. In the course of the interviews, 17 images were shown, involving mammals and birds, in which their rights were respected in some cases and violated in others. Each child had to describe what they saw in each image before expressing their opinion to check their understanding of the message expressed on it (Fig. 1).

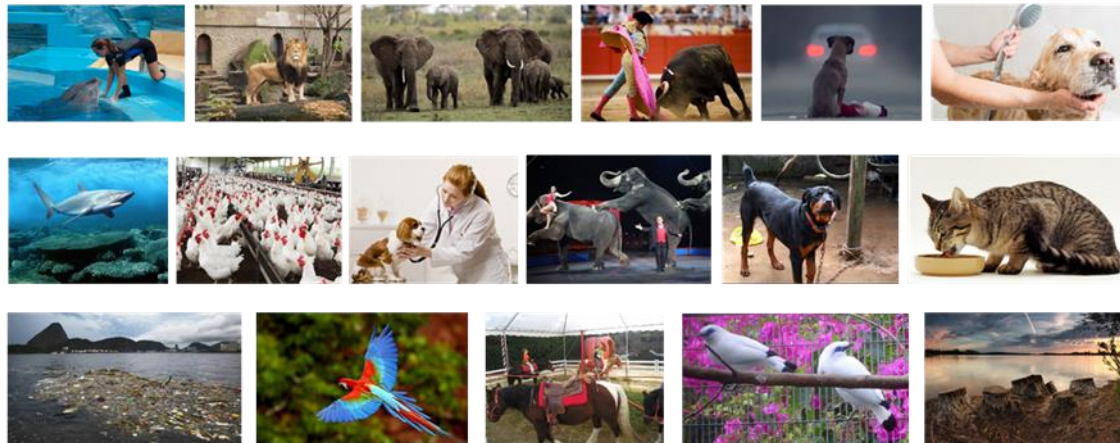


Fig. 1. The group of images shown to each child during the interviews.

The pupils' answers to each image were coded as follows: assignment of zero points to the pupils who did not identify the disrespecting or the respecting of Animal Rights situation; one point to those who identified the situation correctly in terms of the disrespecting or the respecting of Animal Rights but without justifying it in a correct way; three points for answers that correctly explained the disrespecting or the respecting of Animal Rights. Between the two similar interviews, four sessions were held, dealing with different aspects related to the Animal Rights issue. The content of the sessions was the following: (i) The discussion of the declaration of the rights of the child through a movie from Youtube; ii) The analysis of a poster with the declaration of Animal Rights, linking several of its principles to the principles of the previous declaration; iii) The reading of a text comparing the life of captive dolphins with the life of those living free in the ocean, followed by a debate; iv) A debate about the use of animals in the circus. In the design of the intervention plan, it was intentionally decided not to include all the situations portrayed in the images of the interview.

4. Results

In general, the pupils improved their performance in the second interview, after the intervention, in the interpretation of the images that disrespecting or respected Animal Rights. Moreover, their justifications were more complete and more focused on the real reasons that cause that assessment. These improvements occurred not only with images that contemplated situations included in the intervention plan, but also in others not approached during the sessions. Thus, the results show that the majority of the pupils were able to understand the Animal Rights principles and transfer them to other situations not discussed in class.

Table 1 summarizes the results of each pupil in the two interviews through the coding system presented in the previous section.

Table 1. Results of the pupils, numbered from 1 to 20, in the two interviews (1st and 2nd) after the codification of their answers obtained in relation to the 17 images presented. In the last line of the table are the gains obtained by each pupil.

	Pupils																			
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
1 st	27	10	28	27	15	23	27	26	24	35	28	28	26	27	26	31	28	18	33	32
2 nd	37	33	49	43	26	41	41	33	39	49	36	46	49	43	38	51	49	23	47	47
+	10	23	21	16	11	18	14	7	15	14	8	18	23	16	12	20	21	5	14	15

Only pupil numbered 16 managed to obtain the maximum quotation of 51 points (17 images x 3 points). However, they all improved their results, revealing to be more aware of the Animal Rights issue. Additionally, it is possible that with more time to develop the content of the sessions, the results would have been even more significant.



5. Conclusions

The approach to the Animal Rights issue had an impact on the pupils involved in the present study. They clearly increased their perception of several situations where animal rights were disrespected or respected. A good example can be given with the answers associated with one of the images selected for the interview that showed a lion in a zoo. During the first interview, most pupils stated that the lion should be in the zoo because it had food and comfort, considering that its rights were being respected; nevertheless, in the second interview, several children criticized the deprivation of liberty of the lion, arguing that its right to be free was violated. Therefore, they were able to think critically about various situations arguing in defense of their ideas, mobilizing more vocabulary appropriate to each situation. For this improvement, the structure of the sessions in the intervention plan, involving debates and the confrontation of ideas, seems to have been fundamental.

This study intends to be an incentive to the emergence of other approaches centered on the discussion of Animal Rights in formal education. And this can be achieved in association with the study of Animal biodiversity, a topic that is included in the science curricula of several countries.

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