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eating for the future: critical animal pedagogies and vegan education

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This essay draws on recent vegan interventions in education, mainly in a European and compulsory education context. Vegan meals are increasingly being served in schools for sustainability and health reasons, though for the children animal ethics may be an equally or even more important aspect. The growing number of vegan children is pushing for their needs to be met. There are nowadays even some all-vegan schools. How can vegan education pave the way for the ethical treatment of animals while strengthening its position within education for sustainable development and, in the longer run, change norms in and beyond education?

Keywords: animal ethics, children's rights, Critical Animal Pedagogies, sustainability, Vegan Education

Contextualizing Vegan Education

This essay briefly outlines current vegan educational initiatives, categorizing them as meal-based and rights-based. For the last decade, veganism or plant-based eating has been gaining significant popularity for the sake of the environment and, its health-benefits, but also due to animal justice and compassion. Now it is becoming visible in education. My writing is guided by the hope that animal ethics through the mainstreaming of veganism could more easily slip into the sustainability discourse of education and therefore more readily be discussed in school.

From an abolitionist viewpoint to consume animals, to annihilate them though biologically we do not need to, is at the very core of speciesism, and therefore veganism the moral baseline if we are to fight it (Francione, 2015). Francione frequently uses the term vegan education to describe activism that battles the systematic use and abuse of animals rather than focusing on more easily won single-issue campaigns. In *Critical Animal Pedagogy: Explorations toward Reflective Practice* (Gunnarsson Dinker & Pedersen, 2019), vegan education is described as "creating new conditions for learning a different kind of eating" (p. 54):

> We emphasize the learning taking place within or parallel to the larger framework of a different kind of reading – that is reading (educational) texts in order to grapple with how the idea of "the human" has led us to harmful, even oppressive relations with the world (Snaza, 2013). However, new ways of reading and scrutinizing human exceptionalism (Haraway, 2008) may be difficult to incorporate into the present education system since they rely on a critique of the very fundaments of this system. New ways of eating, on the other hand, may work their way into formal education in modes that appear less threatening… How can veganism at all be taught, if the schools

do not actively ask for it? (Gunnarsson Dinker & Pedersen, 2019, p. 54)

It is to this question and those lesser threatening modes this essay now turns. What can we learn from them to further develop vegan education? How might the eating lead to the reading?

Meal-Based Initiatives

With animal agriculture being one of the main sources of emissions, serving up animal proteins is frequently questioned by the scientific community and there is an extra push to bring about change in public places such as schools where the impact could be very significant.

Serve vegan burgers in schools to trigger a shift from meat, says report (Cuff, 2023).

The above headline appeared in the *New Scientist* at the beginning of this year and the report referred to is *The Breakthrough Effect* (Meldrum et al., 2023), which urges governments to use public procurement of plant-based proteins to tackle climate change. To further push and contribute to knowledge and know-how different international, national, or local food initiatives may get involved or be sought out by the schools:

Veggie food campaigns in school

The best-known vegetarian food campaign aimed at public institutions is probably Meat-Free Mondays (https://fridaysforfuture.org). With roots in student involvement, it is designed to be used by other students, educators, or the institutions themselves to reduce the consumption of meat. Developing this further the mayor of New York implemented Vegan Fridays in the city's schools (McCarthy, 2022). Though the mayor was mainly motivated by health many of the non-profits involved, for example Chilis-on-wheels (https://chilisonwheels.org), run by and for some of North-Americas now mostly Latino and Black (Pew Research Center, 2016) vegans, see it just as much as an animal and social justice issue (Holt, 2022). Initially Vegan Fridays received criticism: many students reported finding the food neither appealing nor sufficiently filling, but now other cities and states are taking after. There is an important lesson to be learnt from the experience: when introducing vegan food in school it needs to be more attractive and well-combined than the old meat foods and the change made together with the targeted group rather than imposed on them.

Back in the UK the food awareness organization ProVeg's School Plates programme has, since 2018, served over 8 million vegan school meals in the UK alone (ProVeg International, 2023 April 20). School Plates trains school dinner staff and provides schools with vegan menus focusing precisely on the attractiveness of the food, in terms of nutrition, taste and appeal. ProVeg run very successful vegan school food campaigns also in Germany and supports vegan school initiatives internationally through grants. Background information for going vegan including environmental, health and ethical information are listed and developed on their website. Ethical reasons for not consuming animals are not covered in the sections directed towards schools, revealing perhaps how sensitive this can be. ProVeg, in any case, does not follow up on the meals pedagogically with either material or school visits. When asked the organisation's answer is that there are other campaigning organisations performing these tasks that the schools may consult. Dividing the tasks in such a way may indeed facilitate the acceptance of veganism or veganism as a practical rather than ethical issue and to allow schools to incorporate such changes at their own pace.

Vegan pledge and research

Taking a vegan pledge for a month is another way organisations educate the public about veganism. Although rare, one such monthly food intervention, concerned mainly with sustainability, was organized by a private Swedish urban municipality school involving 800 students aged 16 to 18 and followed up by a study (Lindgren, 2020). The students' discussions on the initiative and the animal consumption theme revealed that plant-based diets, independent of people's motives for adopting them, were widely perceived as politically left, associated with femininity, and disrupting masculine stereotypes whereas old eating habits, that is meat-diets, were perceived as politically neutral. Though willing to discuss issues of animal consumption some students strongly opposed that only vegan food was served. The same study therefore suggests students may have been better equipped to reflect on the issue if the economic stakes behind the consumption of animal products, and the influence of lobbies on schools had been provided and explained.

Vegan pedagogy and the pedagogical meal

In addition to the above, I would add that students generally need to be better informed on the many reasons and motivations behind veganism and vegetarianism: not the least its long historical roots in many cultures and faith traditions. This would include also its different political standings, in India for example vegetarianism is associated with conservative beliefs (Ruby et al., 2013) rather than with the political left. And there are examples closer to home: in Sweden the church's youth section has adopted a vegetarian policy which is influencing the church at large.

Indeed, in Sweden the free meal in compulsory school is considered part of the curriculum and is sometimes referred to as a pedagogical meal (Livsmedelsverket, 2019), especially when eaten together with a teacher who can enhance the students' good food habits: creating a safe atmosphere for eating, foster a sound relationship with food and share knowledge about the impact of food production and consumption on health and environment (Munck Sundman, 2013). Used to its full capacity the pedagogical meal concept could become a powerful tool to bridge between eating and reading and generate ethical discussions not only around food but around animals as well.

Vegan schools

Over the last decade schools worldwide, albeit few, have taken on a vegan or plant-based profile. The reasons behind it are diverse just as the schools in question are varied in pedagogical and religious orientation: some have their own vegan policy and pedagogy; for others veganism is restricted to the food served in school. Below I give a short but not comprehensive overview:

Our Lady of Sion (https://www.sionschool.org.uk) in southern UK provides vegan meals only, though children have the alternative of bringing their own food. The vegan meals are ordered from an outside caterer. Previously vegan Hagaskolan (https://www.waldorfskolan.se) in Stockholm, Sweden also relied on an outside caterer for its vegan food but has now changed its lunch back to lacto-ovo vegetarian. The school itself never had a well-anchored vegan ethos nor pedagogy, according to the headmaster (Karolina Bergom Larsson, personal communication, February 1, 2023) but animal ethics issues are still raised through the initiatives of individual teachers and fellow students. The family-run preschool Blåbärsbarnen (https://www.dagmammavimmerby.se), in rural Sweden, although staffed not only by vegans, identifies as a vegan pre-school, and follows up its all-vegan meals with humane and outdoor education involving the care of free-roaming animals.

The German School in Chennai, India went from vegetarian to vegan when starting their own animal sanctuary. During the pandemic, the entire school closed and what policy it will have on an eventual return is uncertain. A school based in Bhuddism, Maitreyawira (https://maitreyawira-jakarta.sch.id) in Jakarta, Indonesia emphasizes universal kindness and both the children's canteen and the parental kiosk is vegan for multiple reasons. In California, US, Muse, probably the worlds first vegan school, runs its own vegan restaurant with a focus on sustainability. The Solid Rock Community School (http://solidrockcommunityschool.org) in Tampa, Florida, US first introduced veganism on health grounds but now follows it up with humane education classes and visiting animal sanctuaries. In Uganda (https://loveforalluganda.org/atlas-vegan-community-school) and (https://starlightfamily.org). In Kenya (https://genv.org/food-solidarity-in-ukraine-india-argentina-and-kenya) some faith-based recent vegan initiatives for underprivileged groups of children, often with their own vegetable plots, are springing up. These are schools where the sustainability of global food production and veganism as a tool to combat poverty are addressed and lived, but where compassion for animals is also an issue raised.

Rights-Based Initiatives

Giving access to vegan education: Vegan inclusive education and VinE

In the UK the case for vegan education has taken a new and interesting turn as ethical veganism has been recognised as a protected characteristic for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010. Schools are required to integrate inclusive thinking and equality into all their activities, and it is unlawful to discriminate against vegans. Vegan Society's Education network supports educators in their duty towards vegan students and the rights of vegan students not to be discriminated against through their work on Vegan inclusive education (Vegan Society, 2023) Though for the time being this protection and right is restricted to the UK, it could inspire others to lobby for changed legislation in their own countries. British Organisation Veganism in Education [VinE] envisions exactly this. VinE also works to anchor veganism into mainly religious curriculum. On its website (https://teachvine.org) VinE writes:

> Currently, there are insufficient opportunities in the curriculum for children to consider the moral status of animals. We aim to address this gap in education as well as encourage a greater understanding of ethical veganism as a legally recognised philosophical belief.

There is altogether a great need to produce educational material highlighting veganism, not the least because the meat and dairy industry produces large amounts of pedagogical material for schools. In Sweden the industry has a near monopoly when it comes to producing school material on farm animals (Gunnarsson Dinker & Pedersen, 2016) for example the widely used *Arla Minior* (https://www.arla.se/om-arla/bonden-korna-garden) which for balance should be met with adequate vegan counter-material.

When designing material social class, gender and race are other factors to keep in mind. Faunalytics' (earlier: Humane Research Council) studies of vegan outreach materials in the US highlight the need to design the material against the social and cultural background of those who are using them or who they are aimed at: how leaflets are written, talks are given, and campaigns are designed,

choosing language and concepts that are appropriate for the audience in mind and choosing recipes that utilise easy to source and affordable ingredients, Corey Wrenn reminds us in *Unpacking privilege in vegan education efforts* (2016).

Finally, the aspect of making vegan knowledge accessible or rather of fortifying it outside the western hemisphere is of huge importance. Veganism, thankfully, isn't considered just a new fad or a white thing anymore. There are vegan and vegetarian organisations and individuals in most corners of the world. International NGOs such as ProVeg support and make visible these local initiatives and make visible their deep roots in different cultures. VinE facilitates an exchange of ideas through displaying different vegan educational initiatives on their website, everything from vegan forest schools, an orphanage in Ethiopia serving vegan school lunches and community-based humane education in Nigeria.

Vegan education and children's rights

In a world where children are suffering from eco-anxiety it is only decent to offer them knowledge and food that does not further aggravate the climate crisis rather than force them to participate in the destruction. Along with strengthening the position of vegan children Vegan-Inclusive Education and VinE initiatives work to inform all children on their right to a healthy environment, and the right to express concern for animals, including not having to eat them. As Ruth Jenkins from Vegan-Inclusive Education, part of the Vegan Society's Education Network points out in an interview, veganism is something that benefits all involved:

> Because our children need a healthy and safe planet to live on vegan inclusion turns out to be a matter of child protection, not just for the vegan pupils but for all of our children. (Simpson & Piazza, 2022)

Though this may of course clash with the parents' views it reverberates with earlier writings on the child's right to know where the food comes from and how it affects the planet (e.g. Gunnarsson Dinker & Pedersen, 2019; Cole & Stewart, 2014).

While introducing the topic of veganism may encounter resistance, the opposite is also true: meat-eating norms, practices and institutions may be questioned by children on their own account, especially by teenagers. In *Critical Animal Pedagogy: Explorations toward reflective practice* (Gunnarsson Dinker & Pedersen, 2019) we recognise that what is taught is not necessarily what is learnt and that children may develop their own stance regarding animal ethics and veganism independent of vegan education initiatives. These children need to be recognized and supported.

Discussion and Conclusion

Ideas for further courses of action

The findings in this essay reinforce already existing ideas on courses of action but also introduce some new ones. I summarize these below:

- Children need to be equipped with facts and critical thinking skills to be able to critically decipher the messages.

- Give the children an intersectional broad knowledge of the varied history and cultural roots of veganism. Presenting and studying the different cases for veganism such as health, environment and ethics together helps to disperse myths and misunderstandings about veganism.
- When substituting the children's regular food with vegan alternatives make it excel so that it is of better quality and hopefully tastier than what they substitute.
- Meal changes need to be carefully established with the students, as imposing them may have the opposite effect.
- The British recognition of ethical veganism as a philosophical belief provides a legal arena for vegan education and could inspire vegans to lobby for the same development in their own countries.
- Calls for the school meal to be integrated into the pedagogical work, like in Sweden, can provide a pedagogical arena to lift the benefits of veganism in terms of health, environmental preservation, and spared animal lives.
- The knowledge of veganism benefits multiple groups and needs to be made globally accessible through education. Underprivileged communities are the most likely to benefit in terms of health and improved environments and should be respectfully approached.
- We have much to learn from vegan schools in Uganda and Kenya where veganism is used as a tool to combat poverty and hunger along with animal cruelty.
- All-vegan schools are potential role-models and knowledge hubs for building a curriculum beyond human exceptionalism. All such initiatives should be researched and learnt from.

Critical animal aspects: From veganism to animal ethics and beyond

Despite recent growth of veganism vegan education is an uphill struggle: The animal industry is and has long been an integral part of education (Cole & Stewart, 2014; Gunnarsson Dinker & Pedersen, 2016; Rowe, 2012). As humans, we seem to have an inbuilt resistance to change, even when change clearly benefits us. Working for a more sustainable way of eating and especially new ways of relating to animals meet not only with personal resistance but with the resistance from the surrounding society, the state, the schools, their staff, and fellow students. Vegan education, as demonstrated in the text, frequently gets branded as political, not only when it is concerned with animal ethics, but even when associated with climate change and community health, anything system-altering.

> Many schools will resist vegan education on the grounds that it is politically controversial, coercive, and threatening to the hegemonic meat culture in society (cf. Potts [Ed.], 2016) and, above all, in most students' homes. (Gunnarsson Dinker & Pedersen, 2019, p. 54)

There are also other practical hindrances to the success of vegan education such as being able to reach the right audience with the right information. Despite all these difficulties vegan education initiatives, by individual schools or by groups such as ProVeg, VinE and The Vegan Society with its Vegan Inclusive-Education initiative are on a bigger scale than ever before, experiencing a real break-through inviting students and teachers to practice new ways of eating and in the long run of re-thinking/reading:

- By building a vegan base establishing vegan food as alternative and norm

- By establishing a child-centered approach in Vegan Inclusive Education
- By creating a new system of pedagogical approaches based on animal ethics and vegan education

Veganism as a given in education for sustainable development

Incorporated into formal education in various ways vegan education can fulfil multiple purposes, binding together education for health, environment protection and animal well-being. Veganism may in this way strengthen the position of animal ethics within the context of education for sustainable development:

- By connecting animal ethics to a larger ethical discourse affecting humans and other animals simultaneously.
- By offering a multi-solution to live more ethically regarding environment, animals and beyond. It is a bridge to several other sustainability issues: resource equality, climate change, community health.

In addition, research suggesting children think farm animals and humans ought to be treated equally well (McGuire et al., 2023) and research revealing new knowledge on animal sentience (Balcombe, 2016) all point towards the education sector needing to be more inclusive regarding both the needs of children and of animals. Eating more plant-based food might, after all, be more in line with children's values.

Nudging towards solutions and hope

Visible in this paper is also a tension and connection between Critical Animal Pedagogies/veganism as a solution to societal problems and veganism as a personal belief and choice, and correspondingly between rights-based and meal-based initiatives. Returning to my work with Helena Pedersen we identified Critical Animal Pedagogies not only as curricular and planned activities but as individual and organisational spontaneous resistance. "Nudging" veganism forward by serving plant-based school meals as Ruth Jenkins suggests (Simpson & Piazza, 2022), and promoting ethical veganism as a philosophical belief along with the students are positive examples of this and will most definitely help to move the positions forward. Either directly or in the background by providing a knowledgebase for students to fall back on when they feel ready to act. Along with individual change we hope governments and schools will finally take responsibility because, to repeat once more the last sentence from "Education for sustainable development in the 'Capitalocene'" (Pedersen et al., 2021): What is at stake is no longer 'improvement', but survival (p. 227). In this vegan education can provide us with practical solutions and hope.

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