

THESIS SYNOPSIS

What Are the Perceptions of Pupils and Teachers Around the Teaching and Learning of Animal Agriculture Within Environmental Education?

Aaron James Carford-Hamlin 

University of Bath, Bath, UK

Email: ajch22@bath.ac.uk

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Human induced climate change is a narrative uttered around the world with increasing concern (Houghton, 2015; Thomas Farmer & Cook, 2013; Ting & Stagner, 2021 and Wong, 2016). As such, it deems prudent that the topic is discussed in educational settings with an emphasis on human behaviours that cause a large proportion of the problem, yet most environmental education schemes are devoid of the impact animal agriculture has on the world.

This thesis puts forward the question, “what are the perceptions of pupils and teachers around the teaching and learning of the impact animal agriculture has on the environment?” Key thoughts around what the barriers might be, at what age it should be taught, if at all are discussed throughout the focus groups, log books and interviews within an international primary school in Malaysia.

One key question centred around the concept of “shying away” (Rousell & Cutter Mackenzie-Knowles, 2019) from discussing the Earth’s climate crisis when talking to children. Literature around animal agriculture and children’s perspectives often centres around where food comes from and how to maintain a healthier food diet rather than the environmental impact of animal agriculture. Many environmental curriculums are small scale projects (Benavot, 2014) and omit information on animal agriculture.

As the thesis is interested in qualitative data in the form of children’s and teachers’ perceptions and opinions, it used interviews for teachers and a mixture of logbooks and focus group discussions for the children. Children used the logbooks throughout our unit on climate change. After each lesson they wrote down key reflections that they had on that day’s lesson or generally anything that they thought about animal agriculture.

The key findings are broken into the children’s perspectives and then the teachers’, perspectives, though many were similar, which will be discussed accordingly. The main themes surrounding the two focus groups was broken into six: age, balancing the argument, portraying the problem, eco-anxiety/ worry, lack of autonomy and potential actions. “Are we gonna die?” and “they could understand it and help or they could misunderstand and freak out” were two quotes taken from the focus group discussion. Children felt that only from Year 4 (8–9 year old) should they be taught about animal agriculture as any earlier they would not understand the concept.

Additionally, they stated that teaching children should be done through different stories. The children's concerns about age were primarily linked to the difficulty level of the topic. In relation to this, they gave examples of how to try and protect other children from eco-anxiety by using animals to teach children not to harm the environment.

Having a lack of autonomy was also a key finding amongst the focus group discussions. This can be encapsulated with this quote from one child: "my mum would dump me into a pool [of milk] and say drink it." Several children had animal products as part of their diets as their parents cooked for them.

The findings from the teacher interviews were analysed with topics becoming key themes. In order of most talked about, these were: the curriculum for environmental education, having balanced points of view, risks and ethical considerations, subject knowledge of animal agriculture and age. It is worth noting that a number of these themes mirrored what the children had already said in the focus group discussions. Discussions are what the environmental curriculum would look like in the school centred around the idea that children needed to be closer to nature and have positive experiences within nature.

The thesis showed that children want to learn about animal agriculture but that they are fully aware they have little say in what they consume. This lack of autonomy opens up new ideas for research such as learning and understanding the views and perceptions children, parents and teachers have towards animals in general. It was important to also address the concern of indoctrination and so this is discussed as both the teachers and children said that there must be a balanced argument.

Citation and digital source for thesis

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Supervisors:

Elisabeth Barratt Hacking,

Head of Department (Education), University of Bath

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Author Biography

Aaron James Carford-Hamlin is currently undergoing a part time PhD at the University of Bath having just finished his masters in education, also at the University of Bath. Aaron has spent the last 14 years teaching in a range of primary schools, from inner city Birmingham, UK, Kampala, Uganda to Malaysia and now Bolton. He is interested in environmental education and posthumanism.