

# Activities in German-speaking Countries (Germany, Austria, Switzerland) to Transform School Education with the Objective of Increasing Student Awareness of Animal Welfare Issues

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**Summary** — While harmful live-animal procedures in primary and secondary schools are illegal in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, and classroom dissections are either illegal or at least unpopular, there is a relatively new trend in German-speaking schools to handle animal welfare issues by means of voluntary animal welfare lessons. This began in the 1980s, and there is now a growing number of (at this point, more than ten) organisations in German-speaking countries offering such classes and/or well-prepared teaching aids. Apart from outlining the legal situation for animal use in education and training, the different educational concepts for animal welfare as a subject in schools are presented.

**Key words:** *animal welfare classes, animal welfare lessons, animal welfare teachers, educational concepts, school, teaching aids, teaching tools.*

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## Introduction

In a time of increasing technical possibilities, a well-developed sense of responsibility is ever more important in democratic societies. Empathy and responsibility usually develop early in children, and experiences with animals are a helpful part of this process. Such experiences can be supported by animal welfare lessons in school. Today's schoolchildren do not encounter farm animals as often as in the past, and they probably never see laboratory animals at all. Many of them do not even know the basics about animals. However, especially during their time in primary school, children have a remarkably positive attitude toward animals. Therefore, animals and the treatment of animals are a good starting topic for child-compatible teaching of the basics of moral knowledge. Because, in principle, ethical concerns are the same for animals and men, societies that promote animal welfare lessons in schools are probably better off themselves in the long run.

## Animal Use in Education and Training: European Animal Welfare Policy

The objectives of European animal welfare policy are set down in the 1999 protocol on the protection and welfare of animals — a part of the Treaty of Amsterdam in which the Member States of the

European Union (EU) commit themselves to “pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals”. They reached an agreement, however, that religious rites, cultural traditions and regional heritage (e.g. dog-fighting, bull-fighting, hunting — and animal welfare lessons as well) are not influenced by this treaty.

Animal use for purposes of education and training is not a direct object of EU Welfare Policy (e.g. *Council Directive 86/609/EEC*), because the EU is not authorised to regulate matters concerning education (1). But a resolution of the Council of Europe (86/C331/02), adopted in the mid-1980s, recommends that animal use as a teaching tool is not appropriate for secondary schools and that alternatives must first be considered and found unsuitable as replacements.

Harmful live-animal procedures in primary and secondary schools are illegal in Germany (2), Austria (3) and Switzerland (4) — and have been for 70 years now in Germany (5). In Germany, this also includes classroom dissections (6). Therefore, primary and secondary schools impart physiological knowledge through alternatives, e.g. pictures, models, preparations, films, student self-study modules and sometimes through interactive video systems and computer simulations.

For teachers and students who are interested in replacing traditional animal experiments, there is a comprehensive reference guide on alternative methods for a humane education: *from Guinea Pig to Computer Mouse*, published in 1997 (7–9).

## Animal Use and Animal Welfare in Education, Training and Further Training for Professions

In Germany, the one profession in which involvement in the use of live-animal procedures cannot be avoided — because such procedures are part of the mandatory training — is that of laboratory animal technician. Europeans carrying out, taking part in, or caring for animals used in live-animal use procedures — such as technicians and biomedical scientists (e.g. specialised physicians) — are required to have appropriate education and training, which is offered in accordance with the recommendations of the Federation of European Laboratory Animal Science Associations.

*Junior scientists need to be made familiar with the possibilities of alternative methods during their education. This often inspires many junior scientists to voluntarily avoid harmful experiments and choose alternatives (10).*

## Animal Welfare Education in Primary and Secondary Schools

Instead of killing animals for classroom dissections — which is prohibited or at least unpopular almost everywhere in Europe — schools practise animal welfare and increasing numbers even teach it. Animal welfare teachers give instruction about animals and, if possible, also include demonstrations with animals. They show how enjoyable a good co-existence with animals can be.

Why animal welfare lessons? Today's schoolchildren do not encounter farm animals as often as in the past, and they probably never see laboratory animals at all. Many of them do not even know the basics about animals. It may sound absurd, but in primary schools — at least in Germany — many children do not realise that the milk they drink comes from a cow. In Germany, every third child, even in the countryside, mistakes cows for lilac animals — like the one in a long-running German advertising campaign (11).

Animal welfare lessons explain the many purposes for which animals are kept, demonstrate good and bad forms of using animals, and encourage children to act responsibly. The intention is to win over this generation to the responsible treatment of animals — indirectly as critical consumers and directly in their everyday behaviour and in their future professions, e.g. as farmers or scientists. In addition, animal welfare lessons improve the teachers' and parents' sensibility and their understanding of sentient beings other than humans.

What are animal welfare lessons aiming at? As with environmental problems, we need a change in awareness, attitude and behaviour. Where, if not in school, should one start this? Underdeveloped sen-

sibility, and poor knowledge of animals and how to handle them, are among the most important causes of animal welfare problems.

Hence the first objective of animal welfare lessons is to prepare children for a sensitive and responsible treatment of animals. "Animals are not dead matter!". Especially during their time in primary school, children have a remarkably positive attitude toward animals. Because they often feel inferior themselves, being at someone's mercy or at least weaker, they can imagine how animals must feel in some situations. Most children want to learn how they can understand animals (e.g. "How can I see if a dog is friendly or aggressive?").

An important second objective of animal welfare lessons is to help build good character — they are a catalyst for social thought. They are also a useful counter-balance to aggressive thoughts and acts of violence. The aim is to cultivate the usually positive relationship between children and animals, and to strengthen their attitude that weak and helpless creatures must be protected. The question is, how can we help young people to develop a relationship with animals in which both parties act as partners?

It has often been said that in the long run lack of consideration and indifference to the suffering of sentient beings makes people blunt and brutal. These deficits should be addressed as early as possible. Animal welfare lessons help to counteract the trend toward diminishing empathy and instances of violence against weak and helpless beings (12).

Living animals play a vital role in education; young people's opportunities for healthy development are much better if they are given the chance to have their own experiences with animals, e.g. by daily contact, feeding or grooming. It is a commonly held belief among education specialists that children need direct contact with animals (13). Contacts with animals offer the chance to enhance capabilities for observation, empathy, consideration and responsibility. Animals indirectly teach social and communicative skills. Furthermore, they can also help stabilise children if they are in trouble, in a bad mood, lonely or aggressive.

Domestically bred animals with limited space and housing requirements, e.g. aquarium-fish, mice, guinea-pigs, rabbits or small birds, are often kept in classrooms. More than one in four schools in Berlin/Germany keeps animals like these. Interestingly enough, more do so in East Berlin than in West Berlin, and more in high schools and comprehensive schools than in others (14). The keeping of animals in classrooms is naturally limited to situations that are non-invasive and non-harmful. Animals are just kept to establish everyday contact with them. Many schools offer outdoor excursions once or twice a year to special zoos and farms. There are, for example, 200 so-called "ecological demonstration farms" in Germany, which can be visited by classes (15).

## Animal Welfare Lessons in Berlin, Germany — a Project of Erna Graff's Animal Welfare Foundation

Between 1996 and 1998, Erna Graff's Animal Welfare Foundation paid for a mobile animal welfare teacher for the city of Berlin. After decades of working for an animal welfare institution, Mrs Graff, the founder, was convinced that the only chance for long-lasting improvement was to win over young people.

The foundation hired a veterinarian, who offered free lessons in animal welfare issues. There were more than 40 schools in the city that took part in the project.

Depending on the schoolchildren's age, the veterinarian talked about the many ways humans use animals, the suffering and consciousness of animals, harmful live-animal use procedures and their alternatives, and how to keep animals at home.

The knowledge gained from this project was used to write a schoolbook (16) for teachers and students throughout the country who are interested in animal welfare problems and solutions.

## Concepts of Animal Welfare Education in German-speaking Countries

In Austria, Germany and Switzerland, there are three approaches for animal welfare classes:

1. Teaching folders, which can be ordered for free, with prepared teaching units. They usually consist of a folder for the teacher and some pages that can be copied for the students.
2. Mobile teachers, who can be booked by schools for free lessons in animal welfare issues. They usually belong to a non-profit organisation.
3. Further training for teachers in animal welfare issues.

There are some institutions offering free teaching folders; for instance, two governmental authorities in Germany (17), although there are no official regulations in this matter. Recently, also, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) offered their teaching folder in German, which had already been translated from English into Dutch and Greek (18). This folder comes complete with a video-film and a poster.

In Austria, mobile teachers, who can be booked by schools for free animal welfare lessons, have been in use for almost twenty years. At present, the organisation, Tierbefreier Oesterreichs, numbers more than 1,700,000 students in more than 8500 schools, receiving animal welfare classes from their teachers. These mobile teachers attend two weeks' further training with lectures from veterinarians, farmers, lawyers, philosophers, theologians and psychologists (19).

This project is financed by donations, which is a problem insofar as the general decrease in donations has caused a decrease in mobile teachers as well. There are also some free mobile teachers in Germany. For example, Bund gegen Missbrauch der Tiere (BMT) and Verein gegen tierquaeleerische Massentierhaltung (VgtM) are both non-profit animal welfare organisations, each having one mobile teacher (20).

In Switzerland, two projects with mobile teachers will start this year. Two non-profit animal welfare organisations, the Schweizer Tierschutz (STS) and Das Tier und Wir, want to send their teachers into nursery schools and kindergartens (21).

In an Austrian project, veterinarians with masters degrees in animal welfare are conducting further training for teachers in animal welfare issues. This project is organised by the Austrian chamber of veterinary surgeons (22). The veterinarians do not address the schoolchildren themselves, but teach the teachers, who also receive teaching aids from the chamber (23). Another approach to help the teachers is taken by Switzerland. The animal welfare organisations of Switzerland have an Internet database especially for teachers and students: [www.tierschutz-schulservice.ch](http://www.tierschutz-schulservice.ch). In Germany, there are just the above-mentioned books and folders.

## Conclusion and Outlook

Our conclusion is that animal welfare lessons offer great advantages in many respects; we are convinced that animal welfare lessons help to solve a variety of social problems. Because, in principle, ethics are the same for animals and humans, societies that promote animal welfare lessons in schools are probably better off themselves in the long run. Because it seems impossible to finance such lessons throughout the country by donations, it is our aim to integrate animal welfare into some compulsory subjects in schools.

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