

Ethical vegan educators: holding a vegan belief system in a non-vegan school culture.

Introduction:

I am the deputy manager of a small preschool with charitable status, I work as the early years teacher, completing managerial and leadership duties, supporting children and working in partnership with the practitioners and families that attend the setting. I am an ethical vegan and live as much as possible by the principals of non-violence and active compassion. I have been careful to use the terminology *ethical veganism* to differentiate from veganism as a dietary choice. Ethical veganism is a belief system which impacts on every element of an individual's life. Ethical veganism is a belief system whereby individuals will abstain from the use of animal products in food, clothing, entertainment and (where possible) medicine. It holds religious significance to individuals (Johnson, 2015) and is beginning to be recognised as a protected characteristic under section 10 of the Equality Act (2010). Ethical veganism has been observed in many cultures for hundreds of years, often known as Ahimsa (Altman, 2019). Ahimsa is a belief in dynamic, actionable compassion, and is based on three aspects: that humans are essentially good, that the planet on which we live is safe and nurturing, and that truth and compassion are the ultimate and only power a person can hold (Altman, 2019).

Hohti & Tammi (2019) argue that education and the underpinning theories on childhood development stem largely from a constructivist viewpoint, whereby a child's development is man-made and shaped through human social interaction. Education in the UK is therefore human-centric and favours what Duhn & Quinones (2020) call a "vertical relation" between humans and non-human animals (Duhn & Quinones, 2020, cited in Hohti & Tammi, 2019:39), whereby non-human animals are valued proportionately by their usefulness to humans.

In 2019, 1.16% of the UK population identified as vegan (The Vegan Society, 2020), meaning ethical veganism is a minority belief in British culture. I have worked in education for 5 years and have never worked with a vegan colleague or family. I recently had a discussion with other educators during which they all agreed that they have never compromised their core values while at work. This seemed remarkable to me because, as an ethical vegan, I am often compromising my beliefs in order to respect the dominant belief system of the community in which I work. That is, to support the children in unwrapping their ham sandwiches at lunch time; to make my manager a cup of tea with cow's milk; to set out the toy farmyard for small world play, and all the other duties I carry out every day while at work. I am interested, therefore, in the conflict between a personal belief system which views humans and non-human animals as equally valuable as part of a multi-species community, and the mainstream educational culture which promotes humanity as superior and non-human animals as learning aids.

As a vegan educator in a non-vegan culture, I feel I am continually walking the line between the personal and the professional. I want to share my humanity, my beliefs, my ideologies and my values, but I also want to deliver an accessible curriculum, empathise and relate to the families I work with, and be respectful of the views held by others within my setting.

I decided to reach out to other vegan educators, to discover if they share this feeling of *walking the line*. I wanted to find another community of likeminded people, to explore their perspectives of working in non-vegan settings. I undertook research with vegan educators, through the use of storytelling, to determine what issues they identified in their working lives,

and whether their belief system impacted on their professional and personal interactions within their school or educational culture.

Methodology:

I conducted practitioner research to draw on multiple perspectives of ethical vegans working in education. I gathered data from 10 educators who identify themselves as ethical vegans, alongside my own experiences, providing a total of 11 research participants. All the participants were female and working in a range of educational settings, from nurseries to universities.

I explored storytelling with the participants, as a means of conveying their personal experiences in their own language. I asked participants to describe a moment in their working life when their veganism affected their experience of an event. These critical incidents (Flanagan, 1954) may have captured a positive moment, or something that affected the participants negatively. I advised participants to not be discouraged from writing about the seemingly trivial: if it felt important to them, it had value.

Mitty (2010) describes storytelling as being a validating, valuing, therapeutic and transformative experience. She argues that “making someone’s voice heard can, implicitly, help others” (2010:58). Adler & Adler (2011) understand feelings to be primary sources of data and the participants themselves can be the only individuals capable of interpreting their experiences. I felt that storytelling would enable the participants full control over their words, honouring their natural ability to understand and experience (Stake, 1978).

When conducting research ethically, researchers should take steps to ensure the safety, rights and wellbeing of participants (Barnes et al. 2002). To ensure this, I employed several strategies. I adhered to the British Educational Research Association’s guidelines (BERA, 2018), in particular the ongoing nature of ethical decision making throughout the duration of a research project.

I was aware that in telling a personal, and likely highly emotive, story, the participants may feel vulnerable during the research process. I felt it was important that participants could see my own vulnerabilities, that I was as prepared to share my story with them as they were for me. I felt it would not be ethical for me to request personal information from them, without offering the same courtesy in return (Petrie, 2011). Consequently, my participation in the research was intended to rebalance the power dynamics between researcher and participant. I was also guided by the European Early Childhood Education Research Association, whose code calls for a multiple perspectives approach, respectful interactions and resulting work which demonstrates a social contribution (EECERA; 2015).

Findings and Analysis:

Many of the stories told by the participants captured moments within the educational culture where non-human animals and insects were regarded poorly, disrespectfully, or fearfully. This highlights the disparity in belief systems of ethical vegans and the non-vegan culture of mainstream education within the UK. Many of the stories told of common practices employed by schools such as trips to farms and zoos, hatching chicks or butterflies and going on bug hunts.

Hohti & Tammi (2019) remind us that the primary task of education from its beginning was to sharpen the use of free will and reasoning, of which humans were deemed superior to non-human animals. They argue that it is this legacy that has engrained “human exceptionalism” (2019:173) into school culture and curriculum. Spanning (2019) critiques

the objectification and commodification of non-human animals in pedagogical practices. This commodification has been recorded by many of the participants in this research. Rautio argues that children are “both nature and culture” (2013:395), and so to educate children as if they are separate and above other non-human animals may be detrimental to their social and empathetic development (Spanning, 2019). One example of this vertical relation is documented in this story told by a primary school teacher:

“On the day we arrived at the zoo... I walked the children into the ‘Gorilla Kingdom’. The largest of the gorillas, a huge silver back was sitting directly in front of the glass, the children began shouting and waving as he sat there looking at us. The adults all joined in with the waving and shouting and the gorilla just sat there. Huge and majestic with these sad, sad eyes. He looked directly at me and I felt such a connection with him, as if we were looking into each other’s souls. I tried to encourage the children to stand quietly, if we were going to be here I felt it was my responsibility to at least be respectful in our levels of noise. The other adults present didn’t support me or seem to think there was a problem. I felt tears pricking my eyes as I watched him, watching us. It was one of the saddest moments I’ve experienced and it seemed to go on and on. He looked at us with such resigned sadness I almost couldn’t bear it. I was looking around for someone who might be seeing what I was seeing, but no one was. Everyone was happy and smiling, waving at the gorilla as if they expected him to perform a trick. Seeing this wonderful animal sat behind a sheet of thick glass in a cage will never leave me. When his eyes looked into mine I felt the weight of what humanity has done to, not only his kind but all the animals in captivity in the world.”

I wanted to examine the emotional impact this conflict in belief systems had on ethical vegan educators. When I asked the online vegan community for educators to take part in this project, I was overwhelmed with the response I received. Marginalised people struggle to make their voices heard among the dominant group (Hooks, 1991; Eddo-Lodge, 2017; Criado-Perez, 2019). The theme of social exclusion occurred in 7 of the 11 stories I analysed. 7 times out of 11, perhaps, these voices have not been heard.

Often inclusion and exclusion appeared in the same story, which highlights an area of conflict for vegan educators. In line with my ethnomethodological approach, I continued to examine the language used by participants in their stories. Often when writing about inclusion, participants used words like “lucky”, “once” and “sometimes”. I would argue that if a person feels lucky to be included then it is not true inclusivity. True inclusivity is not something that happens once, or sometimes, but always and reflexively. (The concept of inclusivity itself is a particularly human-centric one, suggesting the world is owned by a select few who decide who and what to include or exclude.)

The most common theme that occurred in all 11 of the stories was one of conflicting belief systems. Every story highlighted the emotional burden felt by the educators of having to manage their minority belief system within the dominant belief system of their setting. The participants frequently expressed juxtaposing feelings of wanting to express their beliefs whilst also feeling uncertain of how much it was professional to disclose. One participant, a nanny, described helping her charge to complete a homework project in which children were asked to link an item to an animal (for example “cows give us milk”), writing:

“Zach wasn’t sure what bacon joined to and so asked for my help which then put me in a tricky position trying to balance giving a 5-year-old the morally right answer, the answer the teacher wanted to see and being mindful of how his mother would feel of me giving honest information about what we do to animals in order for us to use their bodies. I felt frustrated and let down by the education system... I felt that my belief system wasn’t recognised and

my efforts put to valuing and protecting all lives and preserving the natural world and environment were futile.”

Hooks (1991) argues that there is often a hierarchical system within education, with the dominant cultural groups often feeling more able to speak freely about their viewpoints. Criado-Perez (2019) also writes about this phenomenon, hypothesising that it is not a wilful exclusion, but simply an oversight of the dominant group, a way of thinking that one perspective is the universal truth rather than just that: one perspective. Hooks (2003) expands on this in her later work, arguing that holding a minority belief system can often cause the individual to feel alienated and even ridiculed, however the acceptance of spirituality in education would bridge the sense of otherness, a way not to impose beliefs but to be modelled and shaped by both personal and community beliefs. Rather, a free and open dialogue regarding differing spiritual and ethical belief systems would “bridge the sense of otherness” (2003:159). Freire observed that “to impede communication is to reduce men to the status of ‘things’” (1970:128). He argued that denial of communication is a fear of freedom and a lack of faith in people.

In 7 of the 11 stories, the participants used caveats designed to minimise, explain, or make their vegan beliefs seem more in line with the predominant cultural values of their settings. In 2 stories the participants used the word “pushy”, explaining that they were not the kind of vegan to push their beliefs onto others. One practitioner wrote “I’m not that kind of person”. In her professional observations of teaching mixed cultural and racial groups of people, Hooks argues that essentialism (the belief that groups of people have clear sets of characteristics that define them and are consistent across the group) is a “system of domination [to]... silence the voices of individuals from marginalised groups” (1991:175). One participant wrote:

“I don’t want to make a fuss and be THAT vegan but I just feel that everyone knows I am vegan, yet they have not even considered to include me.”

Eddo-Lodge expresses this clearly (although she talks about race rather than belief), when she says:

“I have to tread incredibly carefully because if I express anger, frustration or exasperation at their refusal to understand, they will tap into their pre-subscribed racist tropes about angry black people” (2017: xi).

Often participants explained their reasons for telling others about their veganism, with one participant saying, “it comes up in conversation”. Eddo-Lodge’s observation reminds me of the joke: *how do you know if someone is vegan? Don’t worry, they’ll tell you!* Freire (2013/1974) described a difference between integration and adaptation. He observed that to adapt is to change in order to fit in with the environment, whereas to integrate is to change the environment accordingly. The adapted person is an object: a thing with no sentience, the integrated person is a subject: a spiritual, unique being. The adapted person is unable to bring their whole selves to their relationships, which makes them unable to develop a true community with the people around them. If the educational culture is to begin to develop horizontal relationships with non-human animals, to see non-human animals as sentient beings worthy of respect and inclusion, then it must first allow humans to express their individual beliefs and become whole, integrated beings within the educational system.

Many participants told stories that spoke of the interconnectedness and sacredness of all life: what Jung calls the mother archetype. Jung (1955) theorises that a person’s psyche

develops in line with a set of unconscious stories, which a person will make sense of through conscious experience. He argues that a person's understanding of their body and the world around them are interconnected, as a person's early interpretations of what is within the body project outwards and onto the world around, including onto all living things. This may be an especially powerful symbolism for a woman, whose body "bears all living things" and births them into the world. (Jung, 1955:42). One participant wrote about her experience on a staff outing of the school culture regarding non-human life as worthless:

"A wasp took a determined interest in these cans much to the instant dislike of the people around the table. I was not at all concerned by the wasp but others were, they looked at it with disdain and were anxious if it flew near them. I found this fascinating but wanted to alleviate their horror so I took an empty can and lifted it off the table hoping the wasp would fly away. Wasp remained firmly on the can. I happened to be seated next to the SENCO and she said, "Just kill it." She had seen my efforts to gently move the wasp on and was clearly tired of this. I immediately felt concern that if I didn't get the wasp away from her then she may kill it and no one would be bothered except me and the wasp. I also felt disgust at her complete disregard for life, as if this living being was utterly worthless."

The participants were all women, and all vegan, perceiving animals as being of equal importance, as sentient beings, as other mothers and other babies. Ahimsa is one of the core principals of ethical veganism, and it seeks to value the benignity of the natural world, the value and worthiness of all life forms. When examining the world through this lens, it is not surprising that 6 participants used highly emotive words when describing their sense of connection to the world around them. I identified this in particular regard to the animals and insects the participants encountered in their working lives and the treatment of these creatures by other people. The participants spoke of "horror" and "heartbreak" and of "dismay" and "despair". This extract is from a teacher in a rural community nursery:

"One day I was drawing with a group of children. One of them, Emma, called out to me: "There's a spider on your cardigan!" Three of the children jumped back, two of them screamed. I brought the spider up into the palm of my hand and said "well how lucky! All the places in the world this spider could be, and he chose to say hello to us!" The children leaned in, they wanted to see, they wanted to hold the spider too. Joshua tried to pick him up between his thumb and forefinger, I gently caught his wrist and said: "that will hurt him, hold your hand flat and let him come". All of us sat like that for a long time, connecting our hands and making a path for the spider. They held their little faces close and I could hear them breathing shallow, fast breaths, trying to be quiet, trying to be gentle. I said "this spider is so little, and so gentle. Can you feel how softly his little feet are walking on us?" The spider crawled once again onto Emma's hand and she shut her fingers tight over him. Before I had time to arrange my voice into something soft I said "no, Emma!" She opened her hand and showed me the dead spider. At that moment I felt so bereft, so disconnected from this community and, more than anything, so angry. This is unusual for me – I never feel angry at work. I approach everything with patience and empathy, but in that moment I felt like I wanted her to know what a bad, bad thing this was. I said "you've killed him, Emma. That spider is dead now. He was so kind to us and so gentle and now he's dead because you killed him." I walked her to the bathroom and used a tissue to wipe the remaining pieces of the spider off her little hand. I looked her in the eye and asked "why did you do that?" She said nothing. I said "that spider was so gentle, and you weren't gentle back. You killed him. Next time you need to use your gentle hands." Emma stamped her foot at me and shouted "I don't want to love the creatures!" before running away. I felt awful then, I felt I was too hard on her. She's only 3, she's still learning. But at the same time I felt so sad. A little later Emma approached me and wanted to play and I told her "I'm still very sad about the spider,

so I'm not ready to play yet." After a few minutes she approached me again so I relented, we had a story and a cuddle and I told her she was a good person with a kind heart and I knew that really. But it left me questioning where I fit in this community, with these families who kill insects and farm animals and profit from their torture and their death. I will keep trying to educate children about their place in the world, not at the top of the chain, but one of many interconnected loops."

This burden of solely working to reprioritise education from the linear to the holistic, from human-centered to multi-species, is something that many of the participants also felt. An infant school teaching assistant wrote:

"Needless to say I now get called over to every worm/snail they find in the playground."

Conclusion:

Through the use of storytelling, ethical vegan educators have shared their experiences of working in non-vegan educational settings and the culture clashes that have arisen. In their experiences many interactions between humans and non-human animals have been hierarchical; the linear vertical relation described by Duhn & Quinones (2018). There has been very little emphasis on multi-species community (Spannring, 2019) and respectful relationships between humans and non-human animals that would benefit children's development of empathy, ecological literacy and holistic, nature-culture development. This exploitative way of relating to non-human animals has left ethical vegan educators as taking full responsibility for establishing horizontal human to non-human animal relationships and creating a more respectful, ahimsic culture in their school or educational setting. This has compounded their sense of other-ness, often being called "THAT vegan" or "the bug lady".

When Hooks wrote about insider and outsider perspectives, she stated that these boundaries contained, rather than shared, knowledge. She promoted the inclusion of different, non-hierarchical "ways of knowing" (1991:177). Both Criado-Perez (2019) and Syed (2019) also note the benefit of embracing diversity of thinking, arguing that to embrace minority viewpoints is to create a culture of wisdom and innovation. Hooks (2003) that community is often about finding *same-ness*, when really it should be about finding, embracing, engaging with, and learning about, *otherness*. She asked:

"[H]ow many of us compassionately went out to find an intimate other, to bring them here with us today? So that when we looked around, we wouldn't just find a similar kind of class, a similar group of people, people like ourselves: a certain kind of exclusivity" (2003:163).

I propose that by relating to non-human animals and insects as learning aids, by watching them in zoos, eating their flesh and teaching children that non-human animals are objects to be used, the UK educational culture is exclusive not only to humans with minority belief systems but also to non-human animals. This exclusivity presents children with a narrow, human-centric world view which denies them the opportunity to embrace the diversity of all life and learn about the environment of which they are a part.

"All education is environmental education... by what is included or excluded we teach the young that they are a part of or apart from the natural world." (Orr, 2005)

The literature has guided me through this decision-making process: to share or withhold my beliefs. I am guided by Freire (1974/2013) who tells me not to be reduced to the status of a thing, to stand firm in my beliefs. I am guided by Hooks (2003) who cheerleads teachers in their spirituality. I am guided by Petrie (2011) who writes about the importance of bringing

your whole self to work. I am guided by Mitty (2010) who asserts that giving people the power to tell their story, in turn helps others. That has certainly been true for me. Hearing the voices of vegan educators across the UK has reminded me that I am not alone, it has prompted me to open up a dialogue with non-vegan educators and it has given me the strength to be whole, spiritual, human but not superior, authentically and professionally *myself*.

Many participants felt they had a moral obligation to extend their pedagogy (and the wider educational culture around them) to incorporate a multi-species, holistic and respectful community in which non-human animals and insects were treated compassionately. Whitaker describes systems theory as “reacting against reductionism” (2019:15), highlighting the interrelatedness and interdependence of all phenomena. If we react against reductionism, we must also react against essentialism, and acknowledge that both human and non-human animals bring something unique and valuable to our educational settings and to our wider world. Lovelock (1979) proposed the Earth as a self-regulating organism, in which all life was interconnected and vital to the sustainability of the planet. Systems theory seeks to value each part of the system and acknowledge the interconnectivity that exists between parts within organisations such as educational settings. By valuing non-human animals and acting with compassion and respect for other non-human life forms, educators can not only benefit their own wellbeing through developing authentic human to human relationships, but they can also begin to change the educational system from vertical to horizontal human to non-human animal relationships which allow both children and educators to flourish as part of an interconnected, multi-species community.

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