

CHILDREN LEARN TO PROTECT ANIMALS – AN INNOVATIVE EDUCATIONAL PROJECT RUN BY "FOUR PAWS" – PRACTICAL CASE

Dora Radeva,¹ Hristina Petrova²

Abstract: The introduction of the FOUR PAWS educational project "Children Learn to Protect Animals" to the Bulgarian school system was prompted by a disturbing trend of a considerable increase of violence among children, including cases of cruelty toward animals. As a response to the social request for proper reaction and relevant decisions, FOUR PAWS offers a flexible educational program that includes an interactive textbook for children "Close to Animals", a complete teachers' methodology and a new university teachers' program. All textbooks and qualification trainings for teachers are provided by FOUR PAWS animal welfare charity free of charge. The approach offered is focusing on the specific welfare of and love for animals to address the general issue – teach children to be tolerant and show empathy towards both animals and humans, and thus prevent aggression.

The program is directed to pre-school and primary school children and teachers. It is promoted closely with Bulgarian educational institutions and local authorities.

Results: over 6000 kids included, 130 teachers trained; programme is well-accepted in all sorts of schools: of high and not so high reputation. It helps facilitate socialization and integration of children from marginalized minority groups.

The social acceptance shown proves the programme's potential and the need for expansion via new educational tools and measures.

UDC Classification: 37; **DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.12955/cbup.v5.1027>

Keywords: education, educational system, teachers' qualification, animal welfare, children's aggression

Introduction

This paper intends to present the educational project run by FOUR PAWS named "Children learn to protect animals" (CLPA), to describe its essence and the practical steps that were undertaken to put it into practice within Bulgarian schools and kindergartens.

About FOUR PAWS: it is a non-government international organization that operates in the animal protection sector, working for more humanity toward animals, with projects and campaigns regarding wild and farm animals, animal companions, etc. The offices of FOUR PAWS operate in thirteen countries³.

The CLPA project offers some topics that could be specified between civil and ecological education. Also, it is an original tool created to act against the reasons for cruelty both toward animals and humans starting from its roots, to prevent aggression and to educate primary school students at the age of 7-11 in love and care. Its main approach is to make children share some common ethical principles and types of behavior toward animals. Thus, creating a ground of a sympathy towards something in particular (in this case animals) – which appears natural for most (but not all) of the children – to reach the whole, to teach them to show tolerance and empathy to all. So, the CLPA project aims and offers integrated methods for children to develop social, ecological and civil competences and to prevent attitudes to violence.

CLPA Project development

The CLPA project is international, as it first started in Romania in 2005, run by the Romanian office of FOUR PAWS. It was implemented in a number of cities like Bucharest, Brashov, Sibiu, Kluzh_Napoca, etc. The team first developed the original textbook for children, named "Close to animals." The authors are Veronica Tulpan, Sorina Cuzum, Mihai Vasile and Gina Velcu. Actually, the textbook is an interactive pedagogical tool that contains flexible, easy-reading and well-accepted texts, games, questions and topics for discussions, and training situations. It was also translated into English.

In 2008, the CLPA project was transferred to Bulgaria to begin its independent life in the country because of the specifics characterizing the Bulgarian educational system. The beginning was difficult and the CLPA's entrance into the school network was problematic. The Bulgarian educational system

¹ FOUR PAWS Bulgaria, dora.radeva@four-paws.org

² FOUR PAWS Bulgaria, hristina.petrova@four-paws.org

³ More information on <http://www.four-paws.bg/en/>

not only was but still continues to be old-styled, capsulated enough with a strong hierarchy that allows limited access to children for "players" not recognizable as naturally belonging to the system. Although FOUR PAWS' desire to work with the school directors couldn't allow themselves to open the door for the CLPA project without permission "from above" – namely the Ministry of education itself or its secondary units – the Regional Inspectorates of Education (RIE). In the same time, the system suffered many disadvantages as its heavy bureaucracy was difficult to work with. The extravagant and non-suitable academism in the textbooks made them not attractive for students. There was a total lack of links to present-day topics in the regular contents for most textbooks. A clear analysis made for the Institute for Market Economics (IME) describes the condition of the Bulgarian school education as a system orientated to provide theoretical knowledge rather than practical skills (Nikolov, 2013).

Before 2010, when all the Member States of the European Union adopted the Council of Europe's Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education, the Bulgarian primary and secondary schools used to ignore civil and also ecological issues. The importance of an ecological education is crucial for determining the people's behavior to one of the most polarising 21st century problems (Vacleva 2008). Even after the subject of civil education became compulsory, it was approved as a separate subject for one year only and just for upper secondary education. This statement is provided by a report compiled for the European Commission by the Eurydice network, named "Citizenship Education in Europe" (2012).

In the long term, the common neglect of civil and ecological education terribly affected children and young people's socialization and ability to live in the society. In these circumstances, it was not a surprise when acts of aggression and cruelty became more frequent, and some of the most shocking ones were acts of cruelty toward animals. Periodically, Bulgarian media outlets were reporting more and more cases of violence. They raised a great alarm within the Bulgarian society. The live relation between the violence on animals and people is an object of numerous studies (Arluke, Levin, 1999). FOUR PAWS Bulgaria pointed strongly in the media to this relation (Gechev 2010). It was not until 2011 when the Bulgarian National Assembly approved a change in the Criminal Code that determined sanctions for cruelty toward animals that the CLPA project started operating.

After the CLPA's beginning in Bulgaria it appeared that not only the textbook but the whole programme needed adaptation and more flexibility in order to gain success. Aiming at straightening the project's administrative capacity, FOUR PAWS Bulgaria engaged for CLPA implementation trained experts familiar with specific features of the national educational system. There were few new components developed. First, the textbook was translated from Romanian to Bulgarian and adapted, covering the following topics: 1. "Animals have a home, too"; 2. "Animals do feel"; 3. "Stray animals"; 4. "A dog's best friend"; 5. "Pets"; 6. "Animals have magic powers"; 7. "The animal's unseen world"; 8. "Animals work too"; 9. "In the animals yard"; 10. "Animals can be saved"; 11. "If I only was a bird"; 12. "Altering animals' behavior".

The print and distribution of the textbooks in the school system was fully provided by FOUR PAWS, so the books were free for children. The idea is every single student, without any differences, to have their own book while working in groups. The programme is well-accepted in all sorts of schools: of high and not so high reputation. Without having some special intentions, it appeared that the textbook finds surprisingly excellent acceptance within the children from marginalized minorities, such as Roma. It helps facilitate their socialization and integration.

Second, a new strong focus came in line. For the CLPA project's success, it was evident that not only children, but teachers had to be involved in the entire process. Immediately after the textbook translation into Bulgarian, an original and innovative teachers' methodology 'Notes for teachers' was developed, based on the most modern pedagogical practices. The methodology stands far from the typical extra academic style and is close to real-life topics and situations as well. 2-3 different variations were offered for all of the textbook's 12 lessons. The approach used is based on multiple intelligences (Stavreva, Kitanova 2012) and the activities done are a variety due to which teachers can choose their own approach while working with students. It is based on hands-on exercises and learning-by-doing (Pollard 1990) – this way the teachers can see practically and experience the organization of the classroom personally.

At first the "Close to animals" textbook was designed for primary school children, but as it was reviewed by different educational and pedagogical experts, FOUR PAWS was advised children of pre-school age to be joined in their initiatives because of the textbook's well-determined pedagogical situations. Now the textbook is in its final stage of a process of adaptation for this specific age. Along with its adaptation for kindergartens, a second methodology for teachers was elaborated, based on the popular fundamental pedagogical studies for the pre-school age (Getova 2013), (Koleva 2004).

The authors of both methodologies – for schools Stefka Kitanova and for kindergartens Assoc. Prof. Katya Getova – are well-known names, working in the Bulgarian Academy of Science and Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridsky".

Third, in 2014 FOUR PAWS Bulgaria signed an agreement with Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridsky", via its Teachers' Department (DIUU) for a partnership teachers programme. After its authorization, the programme allows organizing certificated training that increases a teacher's qualification. Highly experienced Bulgarian experts with great practice were engaged as trainers. The trainings are specified for primary and kindergarten teachers. FOUR PAWS provided the overall financing for these trainings, so they are free for all teachers involved in the project. The trainings are held not only in the Bulgarian capital –Sofia – but also in other Bulgarian cities as well. By now FOUR PAWS Bulgaria has trained about 130 teachers.

The project is quite flexible in regard to its particular implementation in school. The teachers are free to decide how and where to examine the textbook's 12 topics. They are suitable for the regular lessons of "Humans and nature," "Humans and society," "Art," etc. But as the school day for first-graders is organized as a whole-day routine, the programme is usually implemented as free or out-class activities. The teachers are not asked at all costs to finish all topics for one school year. Some of them prefer to expand it longer and the course may continue up to two school years. In the very beginning of the work process, the involved teachers compose an indicative schedule. In the end of the school year, teachers provide with basic feedback information about all they have done. Teachers give their estimations and suggestions freely how to improve the programme. From the beginning of the project until today the number of the involved children was more than 8000.

Another important component of the project is FOUR PAWS' large informational campaigns for the project's promotion. Usually, they are organized with local support of the RIE and local authorities. These are RIEs that are engaged via their internal networks to inform all school and kindergarten directors under their direct submission for the CLPA project. Most often, as part of the campaigns, FOUR PAWS Bulgaria organizes meeting events with all directors in the area, RIE and responsible experts from municipality to present the project and to discuss its resources.

The model created by FOUR PAWS Bulgaria shows good practice on how NGOs could enter into educational systems even when visible obstacles exist. By now, the whole CLPA budget is covered by FOUR PAWS without any external financial support. This includes the printing and distribution of books, training of teachers, project management, etc. As the programme grew, the interest to it grew as well. More and more schools with their children wish to join and participate, so there is a challenge to meet all the needs with only the organization's own resources.

In 2016, a new Educational Law was approved by the Bulgarian National Assembly and new national standards for civil and ecological education were included. The directors of schools and kindergartens were given more freedom to decide about school initiatives. Now there are better preconditions in Bulgaria for better CLPA project implementation. The next step that FOUR PAWS intends to undertake is to work on the determination of special educational subjects with topics like humanity toward animals, animals protection and welfare.

References

- Arluke and Levin. (1999). "The Relationship of Animal Abuse to Violence and Other Forms of Antisocial Behaviour", Retrieved March 30, 2017 from https://www.academia.edu/25664775/Relationship_of_Animal_Abuse_to_Violence_and_Other_Forms_of_Antisocial_Behavior
- "Citizenship Education in Europe" (2012). Retrieved March 30, 2017 from http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic_reports/139EN.pdf
- Gechev, Y. (2010). Nasilieto nad zhivotni i khora. Retrieved March 30, 2017 from http://www.dnevnik.bg/analizi/2010/07/22/936402_nasilieto_nad_jivotni_i_hora/

- Getova, K. (2013). *Psichologo-pedagogichesko prostranstvo na razvitiето na deteto*. Sofia.
- Koleva, M. (2004). *Pedagogicheska tekhnologiya za opazvane na okolnata deistvitelnost ot detsata v preduchilishna vuzrast*, Blagoevgrad
- Nikolov, A. (2013). *Uchilishtnoto obrazovanie v Bulgariya. Sustoyanie i tendentsii*. Retrieved March 30, 2017 from http://ime.bg/var/images/secondary_education_Adrian.pdf
- Pollard, A. (1990). *Learning In Primary Schools*. London, 7-16
- Stavreva and Kitanova. (2012). *Multiple Intelligences in the Primary*. 21st BETA-IATEFL Annual International Conference, University of Ruse, Ruse, Bulgaria, 30th March – 1st April 2012.
- Vacleva, Z. (2008). *Suvremenni aspekti na ekologichnoto obrazovanie*. Retrieved March 30, 2017 from [http://web.uni-plovdiv.bg/ecology/files/ASCE2008/410-419_Vacleva_\(2008\)_ASCE.pdf](http://web.uni-plovdiv.bg/ecology/files/ASCE2008/410-419_Vacleva_(2008)_ASCE.pdf)