

## Facing the Deaths of Animals

**Ryoko Yagi**  
**Fukuoka Futaba Elementary School**

### 1. Introduction

In my work as an educator, I have seen the real, significant impact on the emotional development that keeping animals at schools and incorporating the care for those animals into the classes can have. The animals that we keep at our school have a much shorter life span than people, which allows children to see the entire span of birth, aging, sickness, and death.

When children are able to accompany these animals on the journey through birth, aging, sickness, and death, even children who have never been able to keep any small animals at home because of modern living environments, or who may not have witnessed the aging of grandparents or experienced death of someone close to them due to smaller families, to experience and consider the concepts of aging, sickness, and death.

### 2. Death among animals kept at school

No matter how energetically and attentively the students care for these animals, they will be exposed to their aging and sickness eventually, and may even have to deal with their sudden death. At such times, rather than pulling children further away from death, teachers and other adults should create an opportunity to have a calm talk through which they can explain the facts to the children (preferably with a vet to explain as well). It is important that children are allowed to engage with death.

#### (1) A first death

One Saturday, a chicken was found dead at one of the schools where we went as volunteers to feed the animals there on days off. The next day was a Sunday, and because the school would be holding an athletic meet that day, there was no time for a funeral until the next week, but with the permission of school officials, we decided to set up a small place where the students could say goodbye on their way to school in the morning in the special play area.



The morning of the athletic meet, one third-grade boy did not want to leave.



A third grader teaches younger students about death

I worked at this school until this spring, and during that time, in addition to integrating the animals kept at the school into classes, we were able to enrich the activities of the student Animal Care Committee and create many opportunities for children to interact with the animals during recess. As the students watched the chicken gradually grow weaker with old age through April and May of that year, many of them spoke of their memories of when the chicken was healthy and active, and they had held her and listened to her heart with a stethoscope during Living Environment Studies before.

One third-grade boy did not have a strong grasp on the context of death. This boy first asked, “Why isn’t Goma moving?” Then, he asked, “Isn’t Goma alive?” Finally, he asked, “Did Goma die?”

I think this shows how he gradually came to an understanding of what death means.

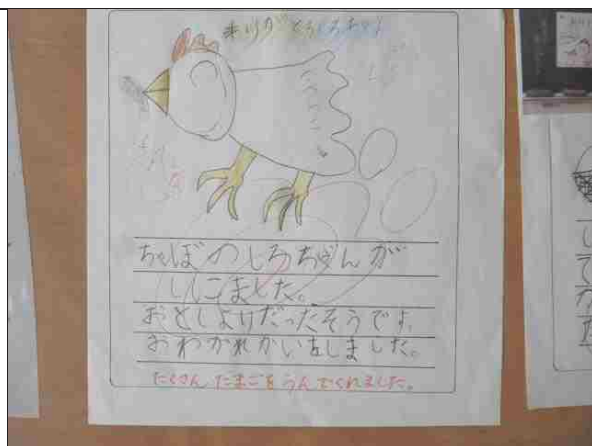
## (2) A second death

Last year, while I was working at this school, there was a death among the animals kept at the school. The vet told the children that the cause of death was most likely old age. I felt that the pronouncement of the vet was effective for children in the student animal care committee who were worried that perhaps they had not taken sufficient care of the chicken or that the time they had allowed the other children to share with the animals had put the animals under too much stress.

The chicken was put in an improvised coffin made from a cardboard box decorated with flowers, and student council members led students in a small goodbye event held during lunchtime.



Saying goodbye



Records and a journal entry on death for Living Environment Studies<sup>1</sup>

Students at different developmental stages had very different reactions to this death, from first to sixth graders, but I am glad that they had this chance to say goodbye to this chicken and think about birth, aging, sickness, and death.

## 3. Conclusion

The year after the murder of a sixth grader by another student in Sasebo prompted the Nagasaki Prefecture Board of Education to conduct a survey of awareness among elementary and middle school students across the prefecture about their conception of life and death.

The fact that the percentage of students who responded “yes” to the question “Do you think that people who have died will come back to life?” was 14.7% for fourth graders, 13.1% for sixth graders, and 18.5% for eighth graders shocked adults and discussion has continued ever since.

I recall that the majority of opinion was critical the effects that the virtual realities of video games have on kids, as 7.2% of students who answered that gave “because you can reset (lives) in video games” as a reason.

However, I do not believe that is the only cause. I would propose that one big problem is the particular distance at which young children are held from the reality of death.

Animals kept at schools should be integrated more closely in curricula because of the essential opportunities it affords students to learn about death as an eventual part of the cycle of birth, aging, sickness, and death.

\* I would be happy to discuss examples of how we have integrated these animals kept at the school into class activities prior to last year. Please don't hesitate to get in touch.

1. We love you, Shiro! Shiro the chicken died. They say she was old. We had a funeral for her. She laid lots of eggs for us.