



# Farmers' perception of stable schools as a tool to improve management for the benefit of mink welfare



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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to explore farmers' perception of stable schools as a tool to improve management for the benefit of mink welfare. Stable schools are knowledge exchange between farmers working towards a common goal, being able to give practical advice to each other. The concept is based on farmer field schools, developed and used in developing countries. Several Danish mink farmers are familiar with erfa-groups which also are farmers meeting, often with an advisor taking part, but the stable schools with only farmers and a facilitator have never been tested on mink farms.

In 2013, we therefore established two stable schools with farmers from five Danish mink farms in each group. The meetings were on the respective farms, and every farm was visited once within a year. The host-farmer presented one success story and two challenges he/she wanted to work with and get contributions to from the group. Qualitative interviews were conducted with the farmers to evaluate their perception of stable schools.

Based on the results from the study, and results from other studies of stable schools, we can conclude that farmers generally are positive to the structural way of working in stable schools, and that motivation for working towards a common goal is very important for the process of common learning among the farmers. The uniform production system at mink farms gives special challenges in how to work with the different subjects to ensure farmer ownership of the process. The farmers did not see the seasonal production as any constraint, but express that they like to work with the specific problems and challenges related to the respective production periods.

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## 1. Introduction

Animal welfare has become an important issue for consumers around the world and especially in Europe, with an increasing concern about the welfare of animals in the farming industry (European Commission, 2007). There are different understandings of animal welfare among stakeholders (Evans and Miele, 2007; Sørensen and Fraser, 2010; Spooner et al., 2014; Vanhonacker et al., 2008; Velde et al., 2002), including the purpose of production as an important aspect of many people's views concerning the use of animals by human beings (Knight and Barnett, 2008). In Denmark and other countries, several initiatives have been implemented to ensure the welfare on mink farms, like extensive legislation in European countries, based on the Council of Europe

recommendations (1999) or Code of practice for mink production (Anonymous, 2011; National Farm Animal Care Council, 2013), and extra campaigns and inspections from the authorities (Danish Centre for Animal Welfare, 2012). Welfare assessment systems for mink production have also been developed (Welfare-Mink), mainly for certification (Mononen et al., 2012) and assessment intended for decision support (Møller et al., 2003). In this study, farmers' perception of stable schools as a tool to improve management for the benefit of mink welfare is explored, but first we will focus on intervention and improvement of animal welfare on farms in general and on how welfare assessment can contribute to this.

Interventions for improving animal welfare in farm animal systems can fail despite reliable and feasible assessment systems (Bell et al., 2009). Therefore, there has been an increasing body of research published on how to move towards actual intervention for animal welfare improvements on farms, based on assessment of on-farm animal welfare with identification of risk factors (Tremetsberger and Winckler, 2015; Why, 2007). One important focus is what motivates farmers to change behaviour, leading to animal welfare improvements (Jansen et al., 2010; Valeeva et al.,

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2007; Whay, 2007; Whay and Main, 2010).

On-farm welfare assessment can contribute with determining priorities for intervention, can give information about the severity of problems and be useful in evaluation of the effectivity of intervention (Grandin, 2010). There are different on-farm welfare assessment systems developed for assessing animals' welfare, either based on resource-based measurements looking at the impact of the housing system on the animals' welfare (Tiergerchtheitsindex TGI35L (Bartussek, 1999)), or on animal-based welfare measurements like injuries or behaviour (The Bristol Welfare Assurance Program (BWAP) (Main et al., 2004) and the AWIN project (AWIN, 2015)), or a combination of animal- and resource-based measurements. One of the most comprehensive systems is the assessment procedure developed in the European project Welfare Quality<sup>®</sup>, with protocols for cattle (Welfare Quality, 2009a), poultry (Welfare Quality, 2009b) and pigs (Welfare Quality, 2009c). The assessment system WelFur-Mink is based on the same principles and procedures as Welfare Quality<sup>®</sup>, with a scoring system which ends up in an overall classification of farms into a category of welfare (Mononen et al., 2012; Veissier et al., 2011). Involving the farmer in the whole process of assessment of their animals' welfare is found to be an important criterion for animal welfare improvement (Whay and Main, 2010). Participation will help the farmer to understand the welfare problem and give the farmer ownership of the process by generating own ideas for possible and practical solutions.

Health and welfare planning is a continuous process in farm management with on-farm welfare assessment to identify risk factors, feedback and planning, development and implementation of interventions and review and evaluation with new assessment. This kind of planning is found to be a promising way to encourage farmers to implement changes on their farm for the benefit of the animals' welfare process (Leeb et al., 2011; Tremetsberger and Winckler, 2015). Several principles for a successful interactive planning approach have been defined for organic production, with a main focus on the farmers' involvement (Nicholas et al., 2008; Vaarst et al., 2011b). External input like advice from a colleague, veterinarian or advisor has also been identified as an important principle, showing to be feasible for health and welfare planning, in face-to-face advisory situations with a farmer and an external advisor as well as in discussion groups like stable schools (Ivemeyer et al., 2012).

Stable schools are knowledge exchange between farmers working with similar challenges being able to give practical advice to each other (Vaarst et al., 2007). The concept is based on Farmer field schools (FFS), developed and used in developing countries (Vaarst, 2007), and on the principle of common learning. Common learning is about learning as a group, working step by step with the participants' own problems towards a common goal or aim. The basic idea is that a person is learning the most when reflecting and handling in relation to his/her own reality and develops the necessary knowledge him/herself (Vaarst et al., 2007), and this is in line with the principles for an interactive animal health and welfare planning.

Farmer field schools are based on common learning, and there is no so-called "expert" like veterinarians or advisors from an advisory service taking part in the meetings, but only a facilitator leading the process. The farmers are learning from and giving advice to each other and are all in the same situation with equal rights to tell about experiences, give opinions and be able to contribute. Two principles of the FFS is that "only the learner him/herself can discover and describe what is relevant and meaningful" and "learning is a consequence of experience" (Vaarst et al., 2007). In stable schools, the farmers are therefore deciding themselves what to work with and what to implement of changes to reach the common goal or aim of the group. External fact based input can be

included in stable schools to support the group in both understanding the farmer's problems and finding possible solutions for improvements. This information should be provided by the farmer or the facilitator, in agreement with the group.

Different discussion groups are common in animal production in many countries. These groups are often farmers meeting with an advisor, discussing issues related to the actual period of the production. In Denmark, such groups are called "erfa-groups" ("erfa" stands for the Danish word 'erfaring', which means experience). As a contrast to the stable schools, where the participants are equal, a professional (like a vet or an advisor) will, according to Bourdieu (1990), dominate the non-professional through the authority of his own profession. Depending on equal trust and practical relevance of the advice for their own farm, the farmer might follow the professional's advice (Vaarst et al., 2007). However, equality between participants is emphasised as an advantage within stable schools when compared with other discussion groups. The fact that the farmers own the process, choose their own problems and aims to work with is another advantage which is found to be very important for implementing changes and welfare improvements on farms (Ivemeyer et al., 2015; Vaarst et al., 2007). Stable schools are found to be useful in improving animal health in dairy production (March et al., 2014; Vaarst et al., 2007). There are also some positive experiences within sheep and pig production (Hektoen and Sogstad, 2011; Studnitz, 2014). Different stable schools have been working with different health and welfare issues, for example phasing out antibiotics from their herds through promotion of animal health and reducing the use of allopathic medicine on organic dairy farms through animal health and welfare planning (Bennedsgaard et al., 2010; Ivemeyer et al., 2012, 2015; Vaarst et al., 2007). Currently, stable schools have been used in farm animal extension systems on themes such as animal health in dairy production (March et al., 2014), sow mortality (Studnitz, 2014) and calf health (Nielsen, 2009a). Many of the improvements implemented on farms were typically basic management routines being effected in a way that was useful for the specific farmer and in line with the farmer's priorities, as especially mentioned by Bennedsgaard et al. (2010). Mink production is a seasonal production, where the animals are strictly synchronised, both within and between farms. The production is therefore often divided into three phases with different welfare challenges in each phase (Henriksen et al., in press; Mononen et al., 2012; Møller et al., 2003): Breeders in the winter period preparing for mating in March (phase one), reproduction period from mating in March to separation in July (phase two) and growth period for juveniles from separation to pelting in November/December (phase three). The seasonality might be a challenge or an opportunity in a stable school where issues discussed might not be relevant until the same production phase reappears the following year (Møller et al., 2003; Møller and Sørensen, 2004). This might render the discussions less focused or provide ample time for disusing, analysing and gathering information for a solution to be implemented next season. However, this seasonality issue is not mentioned in stable schools in sheep production (Hektoen and Sogstad, 2011).

The more problem oriented and committed concept of stable schools, in which farmers find their own solutions assisted by a facilitator, has not been tested on mink farms. Management plays an important role for animal welfare on farms (Hemsworth and Coleman, 2010; Møller, 1998; Sandoe et al., 1997), and in mink production this is related to inspection of the mink, number of mink per farm hand, strategies for feeding, separation and grouping of kits after weaning and for treating or euthanizing sick or injured animals (Møller and Hansen, 2000). Positive experiences with stable schools in other farming productions indicate that stable schools might be a method to increase mink farmers'

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