

**P087 – The effect of the Classroom Canines™ program on reading, social/emotional skills and attitudes to dogs of selected primary school students**

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A number of children struggle with literacy, social/emotional skills and motivation to attend school. While there are a number of initiatives to support these children, dogs have been reported to be significant to the social and cognitive development of children who lack social (Martin & Farnum, 2002) and literacy skills (Scott, Haseman & Hammetter, 2005). The Delta Society Classroom Canines™ program provides assistance to children identified as having difficulties with literacy learning and/or social/emotional skills. Through the program, a trained dog and handler visit a school on a weekly basis and work with children in a classroom setting. This research investigated the impact of the Classroom Canines™ program on the reading and social/emotional skills and attitudes to dogs of 11 selected students at a primary school in Australia in 2013. The students, who ranged in age from 5–11 years, were identified as falling below or being at risk for falling below the academic benchmarks for their year level. The study utilized both quantitative and qualitative data, including reading scores, attendance records, classroom observations, artefacts (work samples), interviews with teachers and students, and researcher journals.

Overall attendance and reading scores improved during the Classroom Canines™ program. The majority of students reported improvements to themselves as learners including enhanced confidence, attitude and cooperation, which were supported by the teachers' impressions. Students reported improvements in social relations with both their peers and their teachers: "Kids are nicer to me and me to them. They don't pick on me now"; "I was mucking up in class... I didn't know the teacher [well] but now I do and I don't muck up". Students' attitudes to animals, particularly dogs, also appeared to improve during the program. While all the students said that they liked animals at the onset of the study, 4 reported that their interactions with dogs had improved: "I've been getting along [with dogs], getting better and better"; "... I have a dog at home. I get along with it better".

In conclusion, findings from the study support the benefits of dog-assisted programs to motivate children and improve their reading, confidence and self-esteem, as well as enhance relationships with people and dogs. This study was funded by a grant from Woree State Primary School, Cairns, QLD, Australia; work was conducted under James Cook University Human Ethics research Committee approval, No H4195.