

“I liked that you can pat the dog and interact with it and read to it” –

Engaging the imagination: The effect of the Classroom Canines™ program on reading and social/emotional skills of selected primary school students

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Abstract

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, an imaginative method of support is through our canine companions. 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 of selected students at a primary school in Queensland, Australia. It utilized both quantitative and qualitative data, including reading scores, attendance records, classroom observations, artefacts (work samples), interviews with teachers and students, and researcher journals. Findings from the study support the benefits of dog-assisted programs to motivate children and improve their reading, confidence and self-esteem.

Introduction

It is widely accepted that children need to be engaged in the learning process in order to learn. ‘Imaginative Education’ is a movement dedicated to engaging students’ imaginations in learning and teachers’ imaginations in teaching to enrich what is taught in the curriculum (<http://ierg.net/>). Teaching imaginatively in early childhood and at the elementary school level makes education more effective as knowledge in the curriculum is brought to life in a manner that makes it meaningful and memorable. One relatively new method of engaging the imagination from both the teachers’ and the students’ perspectives is by using dogs in the classroom to support children who have been identified as having difficulties with literacy learning and/or social emotional skills.

Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) can be defined as involving an animal that is under the supervision of a therapist or other human service professional, to accomplish a specific goal (Geist, 2011; Schaffer, 2008). Although AAT is commonly used to achieve therapeutic goals in the presence of a therapist, it can also be used to achieve set objectives in an educational realm (Friesen, 2010a; Mallon, 1994). Purdue University Professor of Childhood Development, Gail Melson, observed that infants are drawn to animals chiefly because animals are loaded with information (Becker & Morton, 2002). Using dogs in the classroom also builds a child’s self-esteem, a critical aspect of one’s overall development (Meadan & Jegatheesan, 2010). Children appear to readily trust animals as they (dogs) are non-judgemental (Siegal, 2004), and dogs help young students’ emotional stability in the classroom by providing a friend with whom the child can form a bond (Friesen, 2010a).

Possibly the first measured research involving dogs and children was conducted by Boris Levinson in the early 1960s (Heimlich, 2001). He noted that the inclusion of dogs in his therapy sessions with withdrawn children facilitated discussion and positive therapeutic intervention. Animals are also reported to be significant to the social and cognitive development of children (Martin & Farnum, 2002). The inclusion of dogs in the learning environment has also proven significant for children experiencing challenges with comprehension, literacy, concentration, and in overcoming learning difficulties such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Conduct Disorder and Autism (Scott, Haseman & Hammett, 2005).

The first known canine-assisted literacy program, *Reading Education Assistance Dogs* (R.E.A.D), began in Utah, USA in 1999 in a library setting. So successful was the concept that in less than one year, the program was integrated into the school system (Fisher & Cozens, 2014). The Delta Society, Australia was established in 1997 to foster and enhance the mental and physical well-being of people resulting from contact and bonding with their companion animals. Classroom Canines™ is one of the programs offered by Delta with the aim of fostering literacy and social development in primary school students as well as enhancing their social and cognitive development. To date there has been little formal research of the Classroom Canines™ program in Australia. However, Sorin (2012) conducted research on the program implemented at a school in northern Australia and believes that dogs in the classroom can enhance the experiences of students as they grow and develop relevant skills and competencies, as determined by the curriculum, including literacy (reading and writing), and social and emotional skills.

An unpublished BSc (Hons) thesis (Jenkins, 2009) investigated the response of teachers to the Classroom Canines™ program in schools in Victoria, Australia. A number of perceived benefits were found, including improved community links, positive effects on reading practice, academic improvements, increased social emotional wellbeing, positive effects on children with autism and increased engagement in reading. Additionally, a project was undertaken in New South Wales, Australia to investigate the effectiveness of the BaRK (Building Reading Confidence for Kids) program¹ for one ‘disengaged’ (rather than academically challenged) reader. This study (Fisher & Cozens, 2014) found that the participant, who read aloud one-on-one with a trained therapy dog and handler for 8 weekly, 15-minute sessions, had dramatic gains in reading ability in both accuracy and comprehension. A personal communication between the first author of this paper and B. Fisher (5 September 2013) revealed that the case study participant maintained his higher reading scores on a 12 month follow-up assessment.

Methodology

The aim of the current study was to investigate the impact of the Classroom Canines™ program on the reading and social/emotional skills of selected students at a school in Tropical North Queensland, Australia. The research was conducted as a single site Case Study, using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

¹ The BaRK program was created by the Lake Macquarie City Library, New South Wales, Australia based on R.E.A.D. (Reading Education Assistance Dogs - the original USA canine assisted reading program).

The program involved trained Delta dogs and their handlers attending the school once a week for a semester (18 weeks) and students in the program reading aloud to the dogs for 10-15 minutes. Variables of interest included students' reading scores; their evaluation of themselves as learners; their relationships with peers, teachers and dogs; teachers' comments; attendance records and reading test scores. Data were collected using a variety of methods, such as pre and post interviews with students and their teachers, and observations. Analysis was undertaken using the Grounded Theory approach of emergent coding, as well as test score analysis.

Participants

A group of 11 students, eight boys and three girls, ranging in age from 5 to 11 years, were chosen by the school for this project as they were at risk of falling below benchmarks for their year levels. Six of the 11 attended the school's academic success program and four attended a learning support program. Two students were identified as 'disengaged', particularly with reading.

There were three dogs and their handlers involved with this research. The plan was to have two dogs, but two-thirds of the way through the program one of the handlers left, so another Delta volunteer and her dog were recruited.

Results

Overall attendance improved during the Classroom Canines™ program. Students who historically had poor attendance records made the point of attending the sessions so that they could read to the dogs. Some of the students formed strong emotional bonds with the dogs, and, as shown by other research in the field (Friesen, 2010b), these students chose to write stories to the dogs, even though they were not required by the teacher, demonstrating their enthusiasm for the program. This level of attachment might account for the problems that a few students had when the dogs in the program changed, due to a volunteer having to leave the program. These students became reluctant to attend the program, and reported finding it difficult to get used to a new dog. Consistency with scheduling Delta volunteers, and thus their dogs, appears to be an important point for consideration in implementation of future Classroom Canines™ programs.

Reading scores improved substantially during the Classroom Canines™ program. An unexpected finding was that the participating students' reading levels by the end of the program appeared to be on par with the rest of class, i.e. similar to students who were not identified as requiring learning support. The majority of students reported improvements to themselves as learners, including enhanced confidence, attitude and cooperation and reported improvements in social relations with both their peers and their teachers. These views were supported by teachers' impressions. Interestingly, some students' attitudes to animals, particularly dogs, also appeared to improve during the program, despite all the students reporting that they liked animals before the study commenced. Possible reasons for the successful outcomes include the fact that dogs are non-judgemental and are fun to be around (Siegal, 2004); allowing students to relax, gain confidence and change their attitudes towards learning. Some may even associate these positive learning experiences with dogs and enjoy being around dogs even more.

Limitations to this study included that the research was conducted on a small sample of students and over a short period of time. In addition, only children identified as having problems accessed the Classroom Canines™ program. In the future, the program could be

open to all students and research could be conducted on a larger scale and over an extended period of time.

Conclusion

Findings from this study support the benefits of dog-assisted programs to motivate students and improve their reading, confidence and self-esteem, as well as enhance relationships with people and dogs. Although further research is required, these results highlight the need for schools in Australia to adopt such dog assisted programs for the classroom to motivate students who do not enjoy reading and/or lack confidence and self-esteem.

This presentation relates to Imaginative Education by introducing an innovative but practical technique to inspire students to improve their reading and social/emotional skills. Dogs are non-judgmental and comforting; once children are imaginatively and emotionally engaged by the phenomenon of dogs in the learning environment, perceived barriers to learning 'go to the dogs'. This research has implications for how school teachers, and other educators, might consider using dogs in the educational environment to stimulate imagination and bring learning to life.

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