

“I DO WRITING ON MONDAY SO I CAN READ TO THE DOG” – THE IMPACT OF THE CLASSROOM CANINES™ PROGRAM ON YOUNG CHILDREN’S LITERACY LEARNING

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Abstract: Research conducted by New, Wilson and Netting (1986) identified that pets are an integral component of the social support network for many individuals with 95% of those surveyed saying that they talk to their pet, 82% identifying that their pet assists them when they are feeling sad and 65% stating that touching their pet makes them feel better. Pets, in particular dogs, have been used in therapy and education situations for a number of years, and their presence has had a number of positive impacts, including helping withdrawn children to talk and participate (Heimlich, 2001), aiding in social and cognitive development of children (Martin and Farnum 2002) and overcoming learning difficulties such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Conduct Disorder and Autism (Scott, Haseman and Hammetter 2005). While there is some research about the educational benefits of dogs in the learning environment, (Jenkins, 2010), there is a need for further research about the impact of dogs in the area of primary education (Friesen, 2010). This paper reports on a case study research project that examines the initial impact on children’s creative writing skills, self-editing, sense of self as learners and interactions with others of the Classroom Canines™ program, introduced in 2011 into two primary school classrooms in northern Australia.

Keywords: Literacy, schooling, dogs in the classroom

1. Introduction

Research conducted by New, Wilson and Netting (1986) identified that pets are an integral component of the social support network for many individuals with 95% of those surveyed saying that they talk to their pet, 82% identifying that their pet assists them when they are feeling sad and 65% stating that touching their pet makes them feel better. Further, pet interactions are known to benefit people physiologically, socially, psychologically and cognitively, including lowering blood pressure and pulse rates, increasing self esteem, enhancing and initiating social interactions (Martin & Farnum, 2002). For example, in the 1960s, Levinson noted that the inclusion of dogs in his therapy sessions with withdrawn children facilitated discussion and positive therapeutic intervention (Heimlich, 2001). 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 and Hammetter 2005).

The Delta Society Australia Ltd. (Delta) was established in 1997 to foster and enhance the mental and physical well being of human beings through contact and bonding with their companion animals. Classroom Canines™ is one of the programs offered by Delta. Its aim is to fostering literacy and social development in primary school children, as well as enhancing their social and cognitive development through including dogs in everyday classroom activities. To date, there has been little formal research of this program. However, it is believed that dogs in the classroom can enhance the experiences of children as they grow and develop relevant skills and competencies. The Classroom Canines™ program that is the focus of this research was introduced in two early primary classrooms in a city in northern Australia in Semester 2, 2011. Research is ongoing but has taken the form of case study, focusing on students’ creative writing skills, self-editing, sense of self as learners, interactions with others, and impressions of the program itself.

2. The Classroom Canines™ program

The Classroom Canines™ program is sponsored by the Delta Society and Xstrata Community Partnership Program, in partnership with Education Queensland. The program was first introduced as Southwell (pseudonym) State Primary in October 2011 in two classrooms: Class A: a 5 – 6 year old class and Class B: a 7 – 8 year old class. By targeting the early years it aims to assist students as they are developing their reading and writing skills. There are three dogs and their handlers involved in the program. One dog and handler attends weekly in Class A and the other two dogs alternate weekly in Class B. Classroom Canines™ sessions lasts one hour. During this time, students read stories they have pre-written to the dog. Before each session, students write stories to read to the dog. Although they

have already completed some self-editing, students are encouraged to do further self-edits as they read to the dog. When they have finished reading, they are able to feed the dog a treat.

3. Aims of the Study

The overall aims of the research were to examine the impact of the Classroom Canines™ program on students' creative writing and self-editing skills as well as students' sense of themselves as learners and their social interactions with other children, the teacher, and dogs. Based on these aims, the research questions for this study were:

1. What impact does the Classroom Canines™ program have on students' creative writing and self-editing skills?
2. What impact does the Classroom Canines™ program have on students' sense of self as learners?
3. What impact does the Classroom Canines™ program have on students' interactions with other children, the teacher, and dogs?

3.1 Method

A qualitative method was chosen for this study. "Qualitative research provides rich and detailed descriptions of people in action, specific programmes or social practices" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2010, p. 69). Qualitative research relies on collecting data as events occur in real-life contexts, and including the voices of participants and/or eye-witnesses (Lankshear & Knobel, 2010). Within this paradigm, this is an observational case study (Wiersma and Jurs, 2005), where observations supplement artefacts and interviews, conducted in a single site on a specific program.

Participants in the Classroom Canines™ program were 14 students aged 5 or 6 in Class A and 15 students aged 7 or 8 in Class B, their teachers, the three dogs and their handlers, the school principal, and representatives from the Delta Society Australia and Xstrata. Participants in the data collection were the students and the teacher from each of the two classrooms.

3.2 Data Collection

Data were sourced through artefacts, interviews and observation. Artefacts included: visual diary entries – before the research began and at the end of the first term; and students' writing samples – from their weekly stories for the dog as well as the stories that accompanied their visual diary entries. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with five students purposively selected from each class and the two teachers, asking them to comment on the impact of the Classroom Canines™ program on students' writing and self-editing skills; sense of themselves as learners; and interactions with teachers, other children and the dogs. Observations were in the form of running records, where a research assistant attended the dog sessions each week to observe the writing, reading and interactions of children.

3.3 Data Analysis

Much of the data from artefacts, interviews and observations were coded using open or emergent coding. As Lankshear and Knobel (2010) explain, open coding involves applying conceptual codes to the data, then grouping codes into categories and identifying properties of each category. Visual diary entries were also analysed using content analysis (what was included in drawings) and interpretive analysis (how children used colour, line, space, etc. to complete their drawings (Sorin & Gordon, in press).

4. Findings

The results of the research follow, under the headings, "Writing", "Self-Editing", "Sense of Self as a Learner", and "Interactions."

4.1. *Writing*

Data that inform discussion of the impact of the Classroom Canines™ program on students' creative writing included interviews, observations and students' writing samples, from their visual diary entries and their Classroom Canines™ journals (Class A only). Themes that emerged from this data analysis were: more writing, more ideas, higher motivation and more writing time. Each of these themes is discussed below.

4.1.1 More Writing

Teachers and a number of the students reported that student writing samples had increased in length because of the Classroom Canines™ program. One teacher said "children are doing more work and more writing now." About one third of the stories produced by students clearly demonstrated increased length of stories. For example, one of the Prep students began by dictating a story, then wrote a coherent sentence, including a full stop, by the end of the semester. His teacher noted that the progress was very good, as he had been unable to even write letters at the beginning of the school year. During the program he attempted stories because he wanted to read to the dog. The student, himself, reported that he is "getting good at writing". Another student's first attempt at writing (in her first visual diary entry) were "I feel good" and "dog". The next week she wrote a one-sentence story. By the end of the semester she was writing three-sentence stories. A third student began by writing individual letters and by the next week was attempting to write words in a story.

4.1.2 More Ideas

Having to create a story to read to the dog seemed to inspire more ideas by the students. One student said that the Classroom Canines™ program "helped me to make new stories and learn to write letters properly." In her second diary entry, she wrote: "I have fun reading [to the dogs] and it helps me remember my stories so when I make other stories, I have ideas" (presented with corrections). The drawing that accompanies this story is of the student sitting on a chair, holding a book, which she appears to be reading to a black dog and its handler. Her teacher supported this idea, reporting that her students had been having trouble getting ideas about what to write, but due to the Classroom Canines™ program "could now come through with their classroom work."

Another student's first visual diary entry was 3 sentences in length and seemed to reiterate what he had learned in the Dogsafe program conducted by the Delta Society prior to Classroom Canines™ program implementation. He increased his writing to 14 sentences and reported that the Classroom Canines™ program helped him to write better and that he now writes about his life.

4.1.2 Greater Motivation

Both teachers reported greater motivation to write, due to the Classroom Canines™ program. One noticed that many boys had been reluctant to write but there is "not as much reluctance now." The other said that students are "very eager to write" so they can read their writing to the dog.

A number of students also reported greater motivation to write because of the Classroom Canines™ program. They were writing for an audience – the dog – and this provided a meaningful context for their writing. One mentioned, "I do writing on Monday so I can read to the dog." Another noted that she writes better because she loves dogs. A third student said, "The dogs help me be [confident]." Others made an effort to write stories so that they could read to the dog.

4.1.3 More Time

Interestingly, while teachers strive to get students to spend more time on their writing, one student, who reported that he loves to write, said that the Classroom Canines™ program came with more time in class to write. "I wish I could do it [write and read to the dogs] every day," he commented.

4.2. *Self-Editing*

Self-editing was a major focus for this program. Teachers identified a number of criteria for self-editing that they wanted to improve through the program, including punctuation, proof reading, reading back their own writing, one-to-one spaces between words, and identifying grammatical and structural mistakes when reading aloud.

Both classes use an editing chart to self-edit, which includes strategies such as circling letters that need to be capitalised; crossing out misspelled words; using a carat to add a word; and using an 'X' to delete a word. Examination of students' writing samples indicated improvements in self-editing in more than 1/3 of students. For example, at the beginning, a number of students' work was corrected mainly by the teacher, yet by the third or fourth week, while reading to the dogs, they had started correcting mistakes by crossing out words, changing spelling, adding words, and attempting to use capital letters and full stops. One said, "Jed (the dog) thinks I'm a very good writer. When he sees mistakes, I see them too. I see what he's seeing and I can cross it out." Another reported, "Every week [the dog came] I could see my writing and had to make sure I had done the right letters and words."

This was not the case for all students. Many of them edited extensively from the start and others made no or little attempt to self-edit. Others, who self-edited in some weeks, did no self-editing on other weeks, or only attempted to self-edit when prompted by the researcher. When asked if reading to the dogs helped her self-editing skills, one student answered, "I don't know about that because the dogs mostly listen and don't exactly answer...I ask the dogs if words are spelled right. They don't respond but I like talking to them."

Even taking into consideration the differences in ages and abilities of the students, one teacher reported that the class as a whole is now self-editing, but the other that not many students pick up their grammatical mistakes and only a few pick up structural mistakes.

4.3. *Sense of Self as a Learner*

As one of the teachers pointed out, in general, most students view themselves positively as learners. This was certainly supported by the interviewed students, who said they feel good or great as a learner. One reported, "I feel great being a learner...I get smarter, smarter and smarter. When I listen to my teacher I get better and better and that makes it perfect... Sometimes I get stuff right; sometimes I don't. Mostly I get stuff right." However, both teachers did see an improvement in students' sense of themselves as learners. One reported, "Children realise they are capable. Boys feel good about coming to the teacher." The other said students seem to be more confident with dogs [because of the Classroom Canines™ program]. A student's visual diary entry noted, "The dogs help me be confnet (confident)" and another "I Liked the Delta Dogs because they helped me with my stagfrhgt [stagefright]".

4.4. *Interactions*

Students and teachers were asked if they had noticed any impact of the Classroom Canines™ program on students' interactions with their peers, with their teacher and with the dogs. Most responses were about students' interactions with their peers.

Teachers reported that due to the Classroom Canines™ program, students remind each other of the program rules. They take turns and are respectful to each other and the dog. "The children always ask if the dogs are coming in that week. [They] do chat amongst each other about the dogs later in the day."

A number of students reported better interactions with their peers, possibly due to feeling better about themselves. One said, "When I read to [the dog] he makes me get along with S. and all my friends. S. says not nice things to me. When Jed comes in, I feel better and get along better with S." Another student recounted changes in his interactions, from being a bully to getting along with others:

When I read with dogs my writing becomes better and better. This helps me get along with other kids. When I write it makes me gooder and not naughtier." [In his previous school he was a bully]. I be good to dogs but not people. But if I think of people as dogs, I'm good to them as well."

Not only do students report that they get along better with peers, but also that they have more to say to their peers. "I get better friends because they talk to me about how good the dogs are," reported one. Another said, "The dogs make me feel happy, even when I was angry...[Because of the dogs], now I have things to talk to my friends about." A third said she talks more to her friends now because of the Classroom Canines™ program, as they talk about the dogs. She noted that the other students believe the dogs should live at the school." These statements would support the comment earlier that dogs promote social interaction

Some students said that the Classroom Canines™ program made no difference to their interactions with their peers, because, for example, "I get along with my best friends."

According to one of the teachers, interactions with her have not changed due to the Classroom Canines™ program, possibly due to the fact that students never had any fear of interacting. However she noted that the boys in the class seem to feel better about coming to her for help with their writing. This was supported by a student, who noted that she always gets along with her teachers and asks them questions.

However, students' interactions with dogs seem to have improved due to the Classroom Canines™ program. A teacher reported, "Children have grasped how to deal with the dogs. They are excited about the dog, but they don't rush him anymore." Some students reported that the Classroom Canines™ program helped them to get along with dogs. "It doesn't make me scared anymore cause one [time] they bit at me."

A number of students' stories reflected what they had learned about dogs from the Classroom Canines™ program, for example, "I like Jed [dog] because I get to reed to them. When Jed come's to the class everyone heas to sit in a circleaw." Another story seemed to reiterate learnings from the Delta Dogsafe program:

When dogs growl They are argy. When dogs are Happy they Wage Were tail You hafto ask your mum or dad and then you haf to ask the oona then you ask the dog. [When dogs growl, they are angry. When dogs are happy they wag their tail. You have to ask your mum or dad and then you have to ask the owner; then ask the dog.]

5. Summary

The Classroom Canines™ program seems to have had a positive impact on students' writing. Story length has increased and many students have expanded their ideas and writing topics. More writing time may be given to students in class and, most importantly, students' motivation to write, particularly boys' motivation, seems to have increased due to the Classroom Canines™ program.

Improvements in self-editing skills were evident in over 1/3 of the students' writing. While there could be a number of reasons for this, including ongoing teaching and learning about writing and self-editing, there were both student and teacher reports that indicate the Classroom Canines™ program had impacted on students' self-editing. As the program continues, there may be more indications of the impact of Classroom Canines™ on students' self-editing skills.

Most students view themselves positively as learners. However, both teachers and some students reported improved confidence in themselves as learners because of the Classroom Canines™ program. But the most notable impact of the program has been in interactions between students. Students have been interacting with each other more often, with more respect, and with conversation focused on the Classroom Canines™ program. There is also some indication that boys are interacting more with their teacher and that interactions with dogs are more positive and better informed.

The Classroom Canines™ program overall is very well received at Southwell State Primary School. Students look forward to the dogs coming to class and feel positive about their participation in the program. Teachers support Classroom Canines™, although noting that it is a lot of work for them to prepare the students for their time with the dogs. It is anticipated that the 2012 delivery of the program will demonstrate an even greater impact on students' writing and self-editing skills, their sense of themselves as learners, and their interactions with others.

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