THE USE OF THERAPY DOGS TO TEACH EMPATHY IN THE CLASSROOM:

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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Table of Contents


The study was performed in Austria using a population of 24 elementary-age children in order to prove a positive correlation between the availability of a dog in the classroom and good classroom behavior. A video camera was placed at one corner of the classroom, and the class was filmed for two hours every week during what the researchers call "open teaching situations." The class was filmed during a control phase lasting one month in which there was no dog present, followed by a one-month experimental phase with a dog present. The head teacher owned two well-trained dogs that were rotated into the classroom.

The researchers also hoped to see that having the dog in the classroom would allow for greater socialization with regards to the shy students and that the students who tended to act out would behave in ways more conducive to learning. Of significance to me, is that the researchers also expected the behavior changes to be in the form of greater self-esteem and empathy. Also of interest is the way in which the footage was used. The footage was scanned several times looking for specific behaviors which were then tabulated. Whereas this method probably elicits a great deal of information, I wonder why the researchers chose to film so few hours of classroom time.

The researchers found that children self-isolated far less and acting out behaviors were far fewer during the period when the dog was available. The ability of the students to work more closely and together more often, led the researchers to assume that they had become more attune to each other and therefore more empathetic. Interestingly, the students were more apt to pay close attention to the teacher when the dog was present. This is notable to those who may want
to advocate for a therapy dog in the classroom. I can imagine that teachers and administrators are often concerned that a dog is too much of a distraction.

There are a few problems with the study, the first being that there was no outside control group. The second is that most of the children were recent immigrants to Austria, and therefore may have started out the year more withdrawn than a typical class of students. Some or all of the positive changes may have come from the fact that the students had had the opportunity to get to know each other and were therefore less shy with each other. Furthermore, the population studied was small, therefore an attempt to replicate the study with larger and more diverse populations would be helpful. Curiously, despite the fact that girls and boys spent equal amounts of time with the dog, the boys had greater positive changes in behaviors. The researchers stated that they believe this to be true because the boys' behavior began more overtly disruptive.

I recognize two specific procedures that were in place that benefited both the children and the dog. First, the students were instructed to leave the dog alone when she was on the dog bed at the rear of the room. I think that a working dog should always have the ability to remove herself from the work. Second, the dog was free to wander the room and the children were free to interact with her at will, provided they still did the school work that was required of them. I believe that having the dog freely interacting is beneficial because the dog may seek out the children that need her most, and vice versa.

The researchers concluded that having a dog in classrooms was a "cheap and easy means" for making positive behavioral changes. Having a class dog is only cheap if the teacher has an already trained dog at her disposal, as was in this case. Monitoring a dog, getting her to and from school everyday, and keeping her trained and properly exercised is not at all easy. A dog that is not properly trained and certified to work in a classroom setting may be a liability. If a
dog scares or hurts a child it could make it harder for other dogs to be allowed in classrooms within the school or school district. In addition, if other immigrant populations have classroom dogs, great care would need to be made with regards to being sensitive to cultural factors such as how dogs are perceived in their countries of origin. For the most part, the study is a good one, and could be repeated with various populations and with control groups in order to test the validity of the study.
This is the report on a parallel study to "Behavioral Effects of the Presence of a dog in the classroom." The researchers used the same classroom in which the dog was present as their experimental group, and also used a different classroom, presumably in the same school, as a control. There were no cameras utilized in this study. The researchers began with an assumption based on earlier research that dogs are the best animals to introduce in a classroom setting because they are liked by most children and are very social animals. The researchers were expecting to find that the dog would improve the social-emotional functioning of the class, and would do so substantially in those students who had little understanding of the spoken language.

The researchers cited the works of others on the subject of empathy for animals corresponding to greater empathy for people. They also called upon research done on the positive effects on children from their companion animals at home prompting better social-emotional learning and therefore leading to a more positive school experience. Whereas the previous study was concerned with measuring numbers of times certain behaviors happened in the classroom, this study looked at the psychological effects of the dog on the individual children. The researchers were primarily concerned with two indicators of positive behavior and development. The first was field independence, and was defined as certain types of autonomous functioning conducive to learning. The second indicator was empathy for animals, the ability to be more responsive to the feelings and needs of others. The study was done using four different previously designed scales. The use of these different methods leads to a strong study, and
trustworthy results. While the findings of the social intelligence measurement were not statistically significant, the children in the experimental group had a very significant positive change in the measurement of field independence. However, due to the few questions on the scale used to measure this change, the validity of the findings is not strong.

The researchers found that the teachers of both the control and experimental groups had an increase in positive reactions to their students, and they are correct in assuming that this equal change is probably due to the fact that both classrooms had the same amount of time to bond. Perhaps the most significant finding of the study is that the number of students labeled as aggressive in the experimental group was cut in half, but there was little change in the control group. Is there a direct correlation between the level of empathy that a child has and their level of aggression?

I think that the researchers were accurate when they stated that, although there was clearly a positive impact of having the dog in the classroom, because the children were primarily recent immigrants, it is unclear if the study could be replicated with other populations. I also agree with them when they state that longitudinal studies would lead to greater confidence in the findings. Another observation that the researchers made is that the teacher in the experimental group probably came into the study expecting positive results due to the fact that the dogs belonged to her, and therefore the findings may well be skewed in favor of the hypothesis. If the teacher had been asked to take in a dog that she didn't know, or a handler had come in with a dog, the results may very well have been different.

The study was used to evaluate the effectiveness of a program in South Carolina called Healing Species, which is a not-for-profit program that is invited into schools to teach character education and which utilizes trained former shelter dogs as teachers. The program presumes that by teaching children to treat non-human animals with respect, they will in turn display less aggressive behavior. The researchers utilize the theoretical frameworks of social learning and moral development when measuring the effects of the program. First they believe that aggression is a learned behavior. Second they believe that levels of aggression correspond to levels of empathy. And third, they believe that levels of aggression will continue to get worse if the reasons for it are not addressed. The researchers also endorse the theory of planned behavior which suggests that the greater the resources, abilities, and options a child has, the better their self-control.

I have confidence in the study for several reasons. For one, the researchers employed a pretest/post test design measuring degrees of empathy, violent and aggressive conduct, as well as the students' beliefs about aggression. Also, the population studied was extensive, with the participants numbering nearly 400 and were found in four different schools. Additionally, the schools were disparate in both socioeconomic standing and ethnic make-up.

Of added interest, the researchers collected data regarding the number of suspensions for aggressive acts before and after the study. The fact that the number of suspensions went down by about half is compelling. I particularly appreciated the findings in terms of the relationship to
social learning theory. I believe that these findings indicate that using dogs and other animals to teach positive social behaviors will, in fact lead to greater empathy and better behavior outside of the classroom as well.

I agree with the researchers when they state that the use of rescued dogs as one of the core practices of the Healing Species program is of vital importance. In my own experience, children are very interested in the story of my therapy dog and how she was found and adopted by our family. I do believe that her story has significance for them and leads to a greater feeling of empathy towards her. I also agree that a longitudinal study using the same instruments and procedures would greatly enhance the validity of the findings. And, in addition, a control group is essential to strengthen the findings.
The article makes use of empirical evidence based upon observing a dog named Lucy who goes to school with his owner, the headmaster of an independent school in Brooklyn, NY. The headmaster has noticed that not only does having Lucy in the school enhance the feelings of safety and friendliness for the students, but she also makes the days better for her owner. He explains that Lucy helps to keep him calm and grounded when he is in stressful situations, and therefore helps him to be more effective in his job.

Although the author of the article does not specifically endorse the use of therapy dogs in schools, she does state that animals of all kinds enhance learning. She quotes a middle school teacher who states that having animals in her classroom helps her to teach positive social skills and also contributes to promoting empathy. Furthermore, the author writes about how even the difficult death of a class pet can be used to foster empathy and compassion between the students. A licensed clinical social worker is also quoted as saying that allowing the students to care for a classroom pet can produce the feeling of family within the classroom, much as a real family does by taking care of an infant. She also explains how the responsibility for caring for the animal is especially good for children who are very shy or who are behind the rest of the class academically.

Although I agree with the opinions expressed in the article, I think that the author should have also included some words of caution with regards to the health and safety of classroom pets. I have seen too many times that a classroom pet is not cared for as well as most companion animals, and therefore may actually teach children that animals are not deserving of empathy.
The article is intended to be used as an education tool about the importance of teaching children empathy, and how the fostering of positive human and animal connections can be of help in doing so. The authors contend, as many others do, that caring for animals is linked to caring for other people. The authors describe empathy as both a thought process as well as a feeling, therefore employing social learning theory. They also stress that empathetic children are more resilient, less aggressive, have more social skills, and are more popular with other children.

The authors stress the importance of moral intelligence rather than IQ, because a morally intelligent person acts in ways that benefit others. The study "The Effects of the Presence of a dog in the Classroom" is referenced in terms of the improvement the children made in socially mixing and working together. The authors also reference other studies and empirical evidence illustrating the positive effects that animals have in the lives of children. Of special interest to me was the statement regarding how children who perceive themselves as good, caring people, are more likely to grow up to be good, caring adults. Although I agree wholeheartedly with the authors, they do not indicate if there is any evidence to base this on.
Conclusion

I restricted myself to a very small amount of articles by limiting my literature search solely to utilizing dogs to teach empathy. I was able to find only four scholarly peer-reviewed articles that specifically dealt with the teaching of empathy in the classroom. The majority of the articles available focused on reducing violence and aggression in at-risk populations or working with autistic children. I chose the first two articles not only because they matched my search criteria but also because of the overlapping populations used. The third article was chosen because I was interested in the Healing Species program. I spent some time researching the website dedicated to the program, not only in regards to what it contains, but also in terms of how it is implemented. I am hoping to bring a program similar to this to a local area school, and am interested in some of the logistics of doing so.

I selected the WebVet article so as to include a purely empirical account of the value of utilizing dogs in the classroom. This is where I come from in the work I do with my therapy dog in my school placement. I have been bringing this dog, Mesa, to school with me since she was a puppy. Prior to beginning my studies in social work, I was a teacher in a very progressive school, which allowed me to have Mesa onsite with me. Although neither she nor I had any specialized training, we functioned well in the school environment, and I believe, made a positive impact on the students. However, I cannot be certain that having Mesa at school had any real, long-term influence on the students. There were no interventions planned or theory to fall back on. Despite that, my time teaching with Mesa was very rewarding and my intuition tells me that we made a difference.

It was important for me to include the article from The Doris Day Foundation even though it does not incorporate using dogs in the classroom, because I am still operating primarily
on anecdotal evidence. I have long believed that teaching empathy is extremely important, which is why I chose to study it for the purposes of this paper. However, in order to design and then implement a school program, I know that I will have to intelligently answer the concerns of the school staff and maybe even the school district. This article will help me to formulate my reasons for the teaching of empathy.

Perhaps what I learned most from the literature, is that research on the subject of therapy animals in the classroom is still very new. I find this both exciting and worrisome. I am excited by the idea of being on the brink of new and compelling information, procedures, and interventions. However, I am also concerned that both doors and minds will be difficult to open for me when I am finished with my studies and ready to embark on my career as a school social worker.