Dogs in schools: taking the lead towards well-being for all

Source: Burns By Your Side
Aims

• Explore the rationale behind involving dogs in schools
• Outline our position with regard to pedagogical implications
• Introduce our study and explore the key findings of our research
• Consider implications for best practice and future directions for research
1. Dogs in schools

Why might this work?
Biophilia and beyond eg Wilson, 1984; Olmert, 2010.

All therapeutic interventions involving animals rest on a powerful assumption: there is something about animals that powerfully attracts and motivates humans. This assumption becomes especially compelling when children are involved. Melson and Fine (2015)

Sources: Shakara/Kara and Sarah Clements (with permission)
https://twitter.com/AgEntoGirl/status/1362240639417647105
The number of pets in the UK in 2021

- 26% of UK adults own a dog (9.6 million dogs)
- 24% of UK adults own a cat (10.7 million cats)
- 2% of UK adults own a rabbit (900K rabbits)

Number of U.S. Households Keeping Pets

- Total: 84.9M
- Dogs: 63.4M
- Cats: 42.7M
- Freshwater Fish: 11.5M
- Birds: 5.7M
- Reptiles: 4.5M
- Horses: 1.6M
- Saltwater Fish: 1.6M
- Other: 5.4M

(Image Source: Spots.com)
Animals constitute more than 90% of the characters employed in language acquisition and counting in pre-school books’

(Kellert, in Olmert, 2009:10)
If you don’t own a dog, at least one, there is not necessarily anything wrong with you, but there may be something wrong with your life.’
Caras (in Garfield, 2020:ix)
Dogs are popular and highly visible within many cultures


Images Creative commons
Why are the bonds with dogs so strong?

• Humans find puppies around 7-8 weeks old particularly attractive - neotony
• Pet dogs are dependent on humans - nurture
• Dogs synchronise behaviour with humans (Duranton et al, 2017) which promotes relationships eg dogs move when owners move, maintain proximity, gaze in same direction.
• Duncan and Cobb (2014) – calming effect – ‘hearts align’
• Dogs love us as least as much as food
• Oxytocin levels in humans and dogs raise when they gaze into each other’s eyes
Promoting social interactions

- Animals as catalysts for conversation
- Animals as ‘social lubricants’ (eg Wells, 2009)
- Animals as ‘social others’
- The presence of an animal changes the environment (eg Fine, 2018)

Source: worldunited.com

Source: 12 tomatoes.com
Attachment and Friendship

- Humans are capable of, and motivated to form relationships with animals.
- For secure attachment, Ainsworth (1991) suggests the animal must:
  - Be a reliable source of comfort – a secure base
  - Be approachable in the case of emotional stress – a safe haven
  - Create positive emotions when close to – maintenance of proximity
  - Be something missed when it isn’t there
- Animal is not a caregiver but may act in a similar way to a sibling (Carr & Rockett, 2017).

‘Securely attached children feel a consistent, responsive, and supportive relation to their mothers even during times of significant stress. Children with insecure attachment feel inconsistent, punishing, unresponsive emotions from their caregivers and feel threatened during times of stress’ (Perry, 2013, p.4)

- Secure attachment: prosocial behaviour, empathy, ‘protected’ function
Responsive, engaging and attuned
Part 2
Our studies
Our position

- Respect everyone’s feelings, space and thoughts
- Build positive relationships
- Create opportunities for playful interaction
- Ensure that the environment is safe for all

Pedagogical principles for AAIs

(Lewis and Grigg, 2021)
Research design

- 2 online surveys
- Promoted on social media eg teacher and school dog Facebook groups, Instagram, twitter
- Existing contacts and charities directly contacted.
- Networking and snowballing
- Open to all in schools and educational settings
- Follow up interviews and observations
Survey 1
‘Proof of concept’

• 610 responses
• 23 countries
• Variety of species
• Mainly to support wellbeing
• Varied practices
• Dogs by far most popular species
Survey 2 – classroom realities and practices

- Funded study
- Online questionnaire
- Promoted on social media eg teacher and school dog Facebook groups, Instagram, twitter
- Existing contacts and charities directly contacted.
- Networking and snowballing
- Open to all in schools and educational settings
- 800+ responses
- Follow up interviews and observations
Where did our respondents come from?

- Reflects in part our networks
- ‘Other’ included Thailand, NZ, Australia, UAE
- 75% of respondents involved dogs in their practice
What was main reason for involving dogs?

- Improve pupil wellbeing: 38%
- Personal interest in dogs: 17%
- Read some research about benefits: 10%
- Improve pupil confidence eg in reading: 9%
What was main reason for NOT involving dogs?

- Not an educational priority: 40%
- Not sure how to find a suitable dog: 17%
- Concern re: health and safety: 16%
- BUT 59% would consider a dog in future
What do we know about the dogs?
How much training have the dogs had?

- 57% had completed some training
- 35% had not undergone any training
- 8% were unsure about amount of training
How often are the dogs in the school, and for how long?
Which learners do the dogs work with and how is this arranged?

- Individual pupils (34%)
- Small groups up to 6 pupils (27%)
- Whole class (12%)
- Pairs of students (20%)

Pupils aged 5-7 (25%)
Pupils aged 8-11 (30%)
Pupils aged 12-15 (16%)

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Which learners do the dogs work with and how is this arranged?
Health and Safety
What do teachers say about benefits?

- ‘Watching challenged students work on controlling themselves to make the dog feel comfortable in their presence’
- ‘Seeing the relationship between child and dog develop the child’s confidence’
- ‘Seeing children respond to a dog and the dog respond to the children. Smiling faces and a wagging tail’
- ‘They change everything for the better!’
- ‘Going from sad to happy with just a few pets’
- Dog walks are great for ‘tricky’ conversations!
- Social aspect, conversation starters, helping children learn empathy
- The joy my dog brings to the students is magical
What do teachers say about challenges?

- Nothing!
- I have to think of her needs and factor them into a busy day
- Picking up poo!
- Not all dogs will be suited to a setting - need to know the signs of distress and anxiety
- Massive distraction to other students!
- The hair!!!
- Extra responsibility
- Wet dog smell!
- I don’t get much of my own work done when the dog is there due to so many visitors!
- Trying to ensure the dog’s wellbeing
- Time management – making sure the dog gets a rest.

Source: Grace Vobe
Interim summary

• A wide range of dogs present in a wide range of educational context
• Predominantly to support wellbeing
• Involved with a wide variety of pupils
• Great deal of variety regarding training, working hours, locations etc
• Mainly very positive – but there are challenges

• Implications for play?
• Implications for dogs?

Source Grace Vobe
3. Suggestions for best practices
Preparation

Research breeds, discuss what training, arrange for visits, check staff are ‘on board’ introduce the dog slowly to the setting, praise and reward the dog

‘Understand the dog before being in school. Don’t go in to school with a puppy and expect to do your job!’

‘Consider cultural attitudes towards dogs’

38% of schools had a specific ‘Dog Policy’
Beyond thinking about a ‘suitable’ dog

- Calm, happy
- Polite body language
- Happy to be touched all over
- Enjoys being stroked
- Does not jump up
- Walks calmly on a lead
- Outgoing but not demanding (Ellis, in Lewis and Grigg, 2020:176)

We would add
- curious,
- empowered,
- adaptable,
- confident

‘We ask a lot of our animal companions. In reality, we don’t even ask, but rather expect them to enter unfamiliar environments, to be approached and touched by strangers ... we have to ask if the animal is benefiting ...’ Ng (2019).
Partners

• AAI as an ongoing relationship, not an accidental one
• Benefit to both animal and human
• In some sense voluntary
• The involvement of the animal is not a means to an end

• We need to recognise the signals that the animal wants to be part of an interaction.
Respecting what the dog is telling us?

Teachers confident to recognise dog behaviours of being interested, happy, angry and tired than appeasement/calming signals or anxiety.

Many teachers noted that their dogs also displayed over enthusiastic behaviours such as jumping up, barking or toileting inside the school.

There are implications for specific teacher training to read dog body language for school settings.
How do teachers decide if the dog wants to participate?
Planning for a safe environment

Ensure that the environment is safe for all

Risk assessment
This is important because

- A dog may need to be very flexible and adaptable
- Dogs tire quickly
- Dogs work both with children and adults when in the school environment
- A dog is a sentient being and as such requires full attention to wellbeing and care
- A dog is as much a member of the class as a student
- A dog may not have a fully trained handler
- A dog has needs, interests and wishes just like the pupils do
- Interacting with a dog is a privilege not a right
Tails of the unexpected

- If yes to any of these, what happened next?
  - The dog has been overly enthusiastic: 111
  - The dog has refused to participate in an activity: 67
  - The dog has toileted inside the school: 53
  - The dog has growled/barked at an adult: 51
  - The dog has growled/barked at a child: 50
  - The dog has vomited inside the school: 37
  - A child has shouted at the dog: 31
  - A child has physically hurt the dog: 24
  - The dog has scratched someone: 17
  - The dog has snapped at someone: 13
  - The dog has damaged school/child property: 7
  - The dog has bitten someone: 5

Count
Planning and learning

Currently there are many different ways of planning for the dog to be in sessions.

26% of teachers simply plan their lesson and let the dog join in. 19% let the handler plan the sessions.

Over 75% of schools did not allow specific time to train or work with the handler, nor did they offer to pay for training courses.
Task selection

- Create opportunities for playful interaction
- Build positive relationships
Playful learning

Robbie Richards @Robbie_Inspire

ิต mingle some time in the reading corner after school 🐶📚
@Inspire_Ashton @Inspired_ToRead #schooldog

Robbie Richards @Robbie_Inspire

I have LOVED reading these stories all about me! I have been a ballerina, a King, a Sp...
### Dogs in the curriculum - Maths

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Use</strong></td>
<td>Use simple number cushions for the dog to sit on – can assist with number bonds to 10 or 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fetch</strong></td>
<td>Fetch written number sentences (on gun dog dummies) to solve problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Walk around</strong></td>
<td>Walk around the perimeter of a shape or area in the playground</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Assist</strong></td>
<td>Assist with fractions, when dividing denominators into separate food bowls!</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Create</strong></td>
<td>Create a calm atmosphere for memory, confidence and self esteem</td>
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Aaron

- Year 4 (7-8. years old)
- Poor memory for recall, organisation and instructions in Maths
- Working at Year 1 while in Year 4 class – given different tasks
- Very low self esteem – often apologised for giving wrong answers
- Determined to improve
- Worked with dog under the table in 1:1 situation
- Worked with dog outside of classroom on activities
- Stronger memory and association when work completed with dog
- Made great leaps in number bonds, times tables and fractions
- Started to link work across concepts e.g. decimals, percentages
Dogs in the curriculum - English

- Talk about the dog
- Interview the dog!
- Include a dog in the writing journey – suddenly, ‘Scruffy did this.’
- Collect cards with phonemes / letters
- Hide tasks and treats in certain pockets
- Play scramble sounds
- Walk out large handwriting patterns in chalk on pavements
- Treasure hunts for clues
Aleyna

- Year 6 (age 10-11 years)
- Reluctant reader
- Minimal written work
- Great ideas
- Inconsistent spelling
- Worked 1:1 with dog – at first for confidence and encouragement
- Took part in ‘seek’ and ‘find it’ games with the dog to build up stories - photos
- Also used ‘hidden’ phonemes, syllables, puzzle words / jigsaws
- Read with the dog
- Wrote simple sentences and instructions for the dog to complete
Honey and the pre-school setting

- Communication ‘to/ about/ for’
- Working together and problem-solving
- Care and empathy
- Non-verbal skills eg body language/ digital recordings
- Managing/regulating behaviour
- Parental engagement
4. ‘Pawsing’ for thought
Partnerships

• AAIs should be based on respect, empathy, attentiveness, playfulness, nurturing (Van Fleet and Faa-Thompson (2017)
• Kubiniyi et al (2009) - experienced owners report more trainable dogs
• Howie (2005) ‘team with your therapy dog’
• Ongoing training for all

• 'Dogs play little part in choosing their caregiver, and still the person they end up with will have a profound influence on their life and the sort of individual they turn out to be.'
• Benz-Schwarzburg (2020:12).
Frederickson-Macnamara and Butler (2010:137)
Recommendations and future directions

• How can we support teachers to gain an understanding of nuanced behaviours?
• How can we support busy teachers to best manage children and dog interactions?
• What do managers and leaders need to consider to establish a playful learning environment?
• How can we move away from ‘toleration’ and promote enjoyment for all?
Starting points for further reading


