

The Impact of Animal-Assisted Pedagogy on Social Participation in Heterogenous Classrooms: A Survey Considering the Pupils Perspective on Animal-Assisted Teaching

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Abstract : Social participation in heterogeneous classrooms is one of the main goals in inclusive education. Children with special educational needs (SEN) and children with learning difficulties, or behavioural problems not diagnosed as SEN, are more likely to be excluded by other children than others. It is proven that the presence of dogs, as well as contact with dogs, increases the likelihood of positive social behaviour between humans. Therefore, animal-assisted pedagogy may be presumed to be a constructive way of inclusive teaching and facing the challenges of social inclusion in school classes. This study investigates the presence of a friendly dog in heterogeneous groups of pupils in order to evaluate the influence of dogs on facets of social participation of children in school. 30 German pupils, aged from 10 to 14, in four classes were questioned about their social participation before and after they were educated for a year in school with animal-assisted-pedagogy, using the problem-concerned interview method. In addition, the post-interview includes some general questions about the putative differences or similarities of being educated with and without a dog. The interviews were analysed with the qualitative-content-analysis using QDA software. The results showed that a dog has a positive impact on the atmosphere, student relationships, and well-being in class. Regarding the atmosphere, the pupils mainly argued that the improvement was caused by taking into account the dog's well-being, respecting the dog-related rules, and by emotional self-regulation. It can be supposed that children regard the rules concerning the dog as more relevant to them than rules, not concerning the dog even if they require the same behaviour and goal. Furthermore, a dog has a positive impact on emotional self-regulation and, therefore, on pupil's behaviour in class and the atmosphere. In terms of the statements about relationships, the dog's presence was mainly seen to provide both a unifying aim and a uniting topic to talk about. The improved well-being was described as a feeling of joy and peace of mind. Moreover, the teacher was evaluated as more friendly and trustworthy after animal-assisted teaching. Nevertheless, animal-assisted pedagogy can, rarely, cause problems as well, such as jealousy, distraction, or concerns about the well-being of the dog. The study could prove the relevance of animal-assisted pedagogy for facing the challenges of social participation in inclusive education.

Keywords : animal-assisted-pedagogy, inclusive education, human-animal-interactions, social participation

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