

The Impact of Animal Assisted Interventions in Primary Schools: A Mixed Method Intervention Study Examining the Influence of Reading to Dogs on Children's Reading Outcomes and Emotional Wellbeing

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Abstract : The interlinked issues of emotional wellbeing and attainment continue to dominate international educational discourse. Reading skills are particularly important to attainment in all areas of the curriculum, and illiteracy is associated with reduced wellbeing and life prospects, with serious ramifications for the wider economy and society. Research shows that reading attainment is influenced by reading motivation and frequency. Reading to Dogs (RTD) is increasingly applied to promote reading motivation and frequency in schools despite a paucity of empirical evidence, specifically examining the influence of RTD on emotional wellbeing and engagement with reading. This research aims to examine whether RTD is effective in promoting these positive outcomes among children aged eight to nine years. This study also aims to inform much needed regulation of the field and standards of practice, including both child and dog welfare. Therefore, ethical matters such as children's inclusion and safety, as well as the rights and wellbeing of dogs infuse the study throughout. The methodological design is a mixed method longitudinal study. A UK wide questionnaire will be distributed to teachers between January and June 2020 to understand their perceptions of RTD. Following this, a randomised controlled trial (N = 100) will begin in August 2020 in two schools of a comparable demographic, with N= 50 in the intervention school, and N= 50 in a waiting list control school. Reading and wellbeing assessments will be conducted prior to and immediately post RTD, and four weeks after RTD to measure sustained changes. The reading assessments include New Group Reading Test, Motivation to Read Profile (Gambrell et al., 1995), as well as reading frequency and reading anxiety assessments specifically designed for the study. Wellbeing assessments include Goodman's SDQ, (1997) and pupil self-reporting questionnaires specifically designed for the study. Child, class teacher, and parent questionnaires and interviews prior to, during and post RTD will be conducted to measure perceptions of the impact of RTD on mood and motivation towards reading. This study will make a substantial contribution to our understanding of the effectiveness of RTD and thus have consequences for the fields of education and anthrozoology.

Keywords : animal assisted intervention, reading to dogs, welfare, wellbeing

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