

The effects of an animal-assisted reading program on the reading skills of third grade learners in a Western Cape primary school (South Africa).

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Reading problems is a worldwide phenomenon, even in first world countries. Forty two million adult Americans cannot read at all and fifty million read at grade 4 or grade 5-level (Grim Illiteracy Statistics, 2007). According to America Reads 40% of all nine year olds in America do worse in reading than what the norm for nine year olds is. (Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2009). According to the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (Pirls), South African grade 4 and grade 5 learners had the worst performance out of 40 countries that took part in a reading literacy project. This study also found that the reading skills of about 80% of South African learners will not be fully developed by the time they reach grade 5. In 2007 the national literacy figure for grade 3 learners was 36% and in 2009 it was 41%. In 2006 the Western Cape literacy figure was 37%. Literacy can therefore be regarded as a serious problem in South Africa.

This situation may be as a result of inadequate pre-school education, overcrowded classrooms, non-mother tongue schooling and poor tuition (Williams, 2002). Experts are of the opinion that reading tuition and the application of the current curriculum may also have an influence on the test results.

Reading problems may also have a serious impact on the emotional development of young children. Children that struggle to read get anxious and make more mistakes. Their stress levels are raised and they often get laughed at by their class-mates. These children are also more frequently absent from school and their assignments are handed in late (Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2009). These literacy figures and reading problems resulted in the development of various interventions.

There are a number of different types of reading interventions and it takes place at different levels. One type of intervention includes the use of pets. The research done by Briggs Newlin (2003), Francis (2009) and Intermountain Therapy Animals (2009) indicate that children with low self esteem would rather talk to a therapy dog than to an adult. The unconditional and non-critical acceptance of the pet/dog creates calmness and boldness that enable the learner to read freely regardless of how many mistakes are being made.

Research has shown that the presence of a therapy dog can reduce tension. Physiological changes like the lowering of blood pressure as well as a lowering in heart rate (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Jalongo, Astorino & Bomboy, 2004). This was confirmed by the research of Friedman, Thomas and Eddy (quoted in Wells, 2007) which concluded that the blood pressure and heart rate of children that read out loud

to a therapy dog are lower than that of those children that read out loud to an adult or peer group.

The Reading Educational Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.) program is widely used in America. The benefit of a program like this is that the children improve their reading skills in a unique way. The program is also not experienced as just another remedial reading program. This program is very flexible and can be applied and used in a variety of different environments as well as with any socio-economic or culture group. The suitability and value of this type of program in South Africa have not yet been determined, which leaves room for further study.

Registered therapy dogs that have the necessary training, personality and skills to work with children are used in this animal-assisted reading program. The volunteers (owners) with their registered therapy dogs are then used in schools and libraries so that children who struggle with reading can read to the dogs.

Research question: The research question for this study is therefore: Can an animal-assisted reading program improve learners' reading skills? The main objective of the current study is to determine the effect of the animal-assisted reading program on the reading skills of learners. Secondary objectives are to determine whether the animal-assisted reading program could also influence other aspects like self-concept, school attendance, behaviour, anxiety levels and general school performance.

Method and participants: This study is designed as a classic experimental study with a random pre-test post-test control group design (Fouché & De Vos, 2005).

A specific Afrikaans primary school in the Western Cape will be identified. The low socio-economic community where the research will be conducted consist mainly of coloured Afrikaans speaking people of which 27% are under the age of 15. All the third graders will be assessed. Then those learners identified by the measuring instruments, as well as those identified by the educators concerned, with a score of 1 and 2 for reading, will be asked to participate further. They will then be randomly assigned to one experimental group and three control groups (See Figure 1).

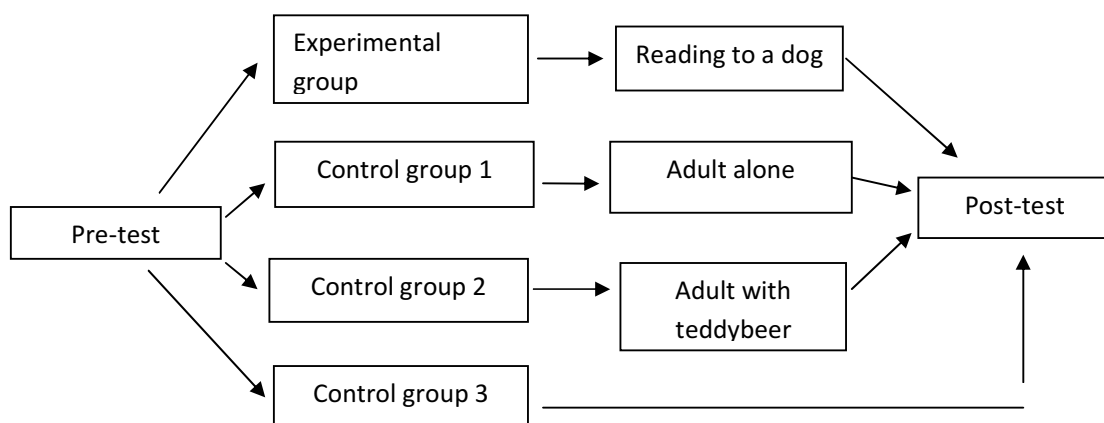


Figure 1. Graphic representation of the different groups

The following measuring instruments will be used: General school marks, school attendance, the ESSI Reading and Spelling Test, the Nearle Individual Reading Test, the Reading Self-Concept Scale, the Self-Efficacy Test for Children, the Screen for the Child Anxiety Related Emotional Disorders (SCARED) and the Uncompleted Sentences Test. The teachers will complete the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.

The necessary permission will be obtained from the Western Cape Education Department. The principal concerned already gave his permission verbally. Written consent will be obtained from the parents as well as from the learners. Learners with allergies and/or a fear of dogs will be given a choice of whether they would want to participate in the research.

The animal assisted reading program of Intermountain Therapy Animals will be used. The selection and training of the R.E.A.D. dogs and volunteers will be done according to the rules of Pets as Therapy (PAT). PAT is a non-profit organization that organizes therapeutic visits to old age homes, hospitals, special care facilities and special schools.

Ethical issues: Only registered, approved R.E.A.D. dogs of PAT will be used. These dogs satisfy all the conditions set by PAT. Only learners who gave their consent and whose parents also gave their consent will participate in the research. Learners with fears and/or allergies will be given a choice of whether or not they would want to participate in the program. According to the rules of PAT each R.E.A.D. team must have insurance for public liability. No other dogs will be allowed to be used in the school. The R.E.A.D. dog must at all times be on a leash and under control of the volunteer.

Expected risks: Initially some learners may have a fear of dogs. However, only registered and approved R.E.A.D. dogs of PAT will be used and these dogs satisfy the conditions set by PAT. The learners will also be given a choice of whether they would want to participate in the project. It is possible that educators may have negative opinions about the reading program and that the day to day school program may have an influence.

Expected benefits: An improvement in reading skills, self concept, behaviour, school attendance, the handing in of homework assignments on time and a lowering of anxiety levels are expected.

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