



**Report on the Delta Classroom Canines™
Program in Schools in Geelong/Bellarine Region**



A report for Delta Society Australia Limited

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Executive Summary

Background

The Delta Society Australia focuses on the use of therapy dogs in promoting health and well-being with people who have a health or well-being need. In the Geelong/Bellarine region of Victoria, the Delta Classroom Canines™ program is part of the Society's activities in the region and this program focuses on children in mainstream schools who are having difficulty reading. The program is directly focused on working with students during reading programs set up in their classroom curricula. In 2008, key informant interviews of volunteers who were involved with the Delta Classroom Canines™ program and attended schools in the Geelong/Bellarine Branch were interviewed on their perceptions of the value of integrating therapy dogs into mainstream primary schools. Volunteers in this program were purposefully selected based on their participation within the program, as part of the volunteer activities, children's drawings of the day the dog came to school were gathered by the volunteers. These drawings are as a reflection of the child's view of the dogs in the classroom. This qualitative study investigated the therapeutic benefits of a volunteer based program using therapy dogs visiting mainstream primary schools. In early 2009, teachers and principals from those schools involved in the program will be interviewed as well as a survey on the well-being of children in the program. This report is an interim report on the Delta Classroom Canines™ program.

Method

Ethics approval was granted through Deakin University and the Department of Education and Child Development. Four program volunteers were interviewed from the Delta Classroom Canines™ program. Semi-structured interviews were used for gaining information regarding the use of therapy dogs in mainstream primary schools. The interviews were then transcribed and copies of the transcripts were externally audited by a third party for checking consistency. The transcripts were then returned to the volunteer participants for member checking so they could add or remove any information they felt necessary.

Grade one students who had the Delta Classroom Canines™ program integrated into their curricula were invited by the volunteers to draw a picture of 'the day the dog came to school'. Children from six classrooms across four primary schools in the Geelong/Bellarine region were invited to draw a picture. Use of drawings was selected for primary school student participation as it was an age appropriate and classroom appropriate activity.

The transcripts were analysed for recurrent themes, and were also analysed using the 'Doing, Being, Becoming and Belonging' model (Wilcock, 2006). The Doing, Being, Becoming and Belonging model was chosen as a framework because in human life these components are the foundations for how health and wellbeing are promoted in individuals. The drawings were analysed for size of figure and colours used.

Findings

The results showed a number of benefits of the Delta Society's Classroom Canines™ program. Five key themes were identified. The first theme called *'Increased enjoyment and improved classroom performance'* identified that from the perspectives of the volunteers the students enjoyed participating in classroom activities with the therapy dogs present and that it increased the quality of their work. Second, the presence of the volunteers and the therapy dogs provided extra support to the teachers and facilitated additional opportunities for student learning. This theme is called *'Extra support for students' learning'*. Thirdly, the company of the therapy dogs provided emotional support to the students as the dogs are perceived as being non-judgemental in their nature. This theme is called *'Therapy dogs listen to me'*. The fourth theme called, *'Rewarding for the volunteers'*, was the benefit of the Delta Classroom Canines™ program to the people who volunteer. Volunteers found participation in classroom based animal assisted therapy a rewarding experience. They described this as a way they are able to contribute, to 'give back to the community'. The final theme, called *'The dog as the therapeutic medium'*, expounded on the qualities unique to therapy dogs in a mainstream primary school environment.

The act of volunteering with a therapy dog provided a sense of well-being upon the volunteer. Volunteers found the 'doing' of the program rewarding as they gave back to the community, spent time with the children, spent time with their dogs that they love, and felt that they were doing something good for their dogs in the process. Volunteers gained much satisfaction and enjoyment from being involved in the Delta Classroom Canines™ program and stated that they were 'becoming' masterful at what they did. They also 'belonged' to an organisation which they perceived to be contributing to the community in a very positive way.

The volunteers believed that having the dog as a therapeutic medium in the classroom was the key to success in their role of helping out within that environment. The children responded more directly to the dogs' presence, which in turn, broke down classroom barriers. Such barriers included students' social isolation from peers and anxiety regarding their academic performance. The program enhanced both personal and community development, health and well-being for both volunteers and students.

Introduction

As early as the 1700's, animals were thought to contribute to an improved quality of health and wellbeing in humans (Brodie & Biley, 1999; Heimlich, 2001; Kaminski et. al., 2002; McConnell, 2002; Pitts, 2005; Velde, et. al., 2005; Winkle & Canfield, 2008; Wood et. al., 2005). Dogs, in particular, are now selected for remedial use based on their health, owner and handler, temperament, obedience and behavioural training and conditioning (Stanley-Hermanns & Miller, 2002). These dogs are called 'therapy dogs'.

The Delta Society (USA) has been assisting health and well-being through the human-animal bond since 1977 from its roots in Portland, Oregon. Delta Society Australia bases its work on an ever growing evidence base that illustrates the benefits of animal assisted therapy across a variety of health care domains. Much of the work of Delta Society Australia focuses on the use of therapy dogs in promoting health and well-being (Delta Society, 2008a). Animal assisted therapy using therapy dogs is becoming a common practice by health care professionals to assist the well-being of a variety of clientele (Jorgenson, 1997; Kaminski, Pellino, & Wish, 2002; Velde, Cipriani, & Fisher, 2005; Wood, Giles-Corti, & Bulsara, 2005). There is a vast array of environments where therapy dogs have been found to be beneficial.

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is believed to benefit participants as it links physical and emotional status (Johnson & Gayer, 2008; Jorgenson, 1997). Additionally, an animal is non-judgmental and accepting regardless of whom they are interacting with. Animals allow people to reveal more of themselves through the provision of unconditional love (Johnson & Gayer, 2008; Jorgenson, 1997), and attachment to a pet can occur without ownership of the particular animal (Johnson, Odendaal, & Meadows, 2002). Evidence of AAT in various settings is discussed below.

Animal Assisted Therapy and hospital settings for physical health

A number of research studies have found that AAT can improve physical health by protecting against cardiovascular disease and lowering blood pressure (Brodie & Biley, 1999; Heimlich, 2001; Johnson & Gayer, 2008; Johnson et al., 2002; Kaminski et al., 2002; Martin & Farnum, 2002; Moody, Maps, & O'Rourke, 2002; Stanley-Hermanns & Miller, 2002; Velde et al., 2005; Wells, 2007; Wood et al., 2005). AAT has also been shown to increase the range of motion in a person's joints as a result of petting animals, as well as a decrease in the need for pain medication through distraction (Connor & Miller, 2001; Johnson, Meadows, Haubner, & Sevedge, 2008; McConnell, 2002; Stanley-Hermanns & Miller, 2002; Velde et al., 2005).

A randomised control trial of inpatients in a cardiac observation unit, with advanced heart failure requiring an indwelling pulmonary artery catheter, was conducted by Cole et al. (2007). It determined those patients who received a 12 minute weekly visit from a volunteer and their dog had lower cardiopulmonary pressure and patient anxiety levels than patients who were visited by a

volunteer only, and patients who received standard care only. It is proposed that AAT may neutralise mental stressors in the acute healthcare facility that moderates anxiety thus benefiting cardiac health. Patients in a radiation-oncology unit that were exposed to the complementary therapy of AAT were reported to view their general health as improving when compared to patients who did not receive AAT (Johnson et al., 2008).

Animal Assisted Therapy and mental health

AAT has been found to enhance psychological health by improving mood (Johnson et al., 2008; Moody et al., 2002), reducing anxiety (Cole, Gawlinski, Steers, & Kotlerman, 2007; Martin & Farnum, 2002), providing stress relief, decreasing depression, improving social ability, self esteem and self concept, increasing life satisfaction and community integration (Brodie & Biley, 1999; Darrah, 1996; McConnell, 2002; Stanley-Hermanns & Miller, 2002; Velde et al., 2005; Wells, 2007; Wood et al., 2005). AAT has been shown to alleviate problems associated with mood disorders such as schizophrenia (Kovacs, 2004; Smoyak, 2003), and decrease irritable behaviours associated with mental health conditions (Velde et al., 2005). A cohort study demonstrated improvement in domestic and health activities by people with schizophrenia who resided in a social institution following nine months of weekly AAT (Kovacs, 2004). In a psychiatric setting, AAT has been shown to assist individuals in being able to relate to themselves and others around them (Niksa, 2007).

Antonoli and Reveley (2005) found that using AAT with dolphins significantly reduced severity of symptoms of depression in adults. AAT with dogs has been found to provide clients, in an acute setting, with motivation to return to their life outside of the hospital environment (Connor & Miller, 2001; Velde et al., 2005).

Animal Assisted Therapy and long term care settings

A phenomenological research design using case studies conducted by Ferrese, Forster, Kowalski and Wasilewski (1998, as cited in Velde et al., 2005) found that elderly people in a long-term care setting are more likely to attend and continue participation in occupational therapy intervention if therapy involved AAT. The elderly people also demonstrated anticipation for the animals returning to visit them. In a long-term care setting, AAT facilitated a new occupational role of caretaking for residents. This caretaking role resulted in residents taking responsibility and nurturing for the animals. A small, qualitative study with 14 participants who lived with severe disability, demonstrated a positive trend for adaptive functioning and behaviour as a result of participation in AAT when compared with those who did not participate (Heimlich, 2001).

Animal Assisted Therapy and the community

Research in the form of a qualitative study using a cross sectional telephone survey was conducted in Western Australia by Wood et al. (2005). Wood et al.'s study uncovered emerging evidence that pet ownership can benefit the wider community by increasing physical, psychological and psychosocial health and therefore potentially increase the likelihood that pet owners will

become facilitators for AAT through community engagement. AAT has psychosocial benefits (Martin & Farnum, 2002) through the promotion of social interaction and conversation, and facilitating the establishment of trust and relationships with neighbours (Cole et al., 2007; Johnson & Gayer, 2008; Jorgenson, 1997; McConnell, 2002; Wood et al., 2005) as well as overcoming shyness (Smoyak, 2003). Animals, as domesticated pets, have been able to provide a commonality across different ages, genders, cultures and socio-economic status (Jorgenson, 1997; Stanley-Hermanns & Miller, 2002; Wood et al., 2005).

Animal Assisted Therapy and health-care professionals

AAT is presently provided by a variety of health-care professionals within the confines of the practitioner's specific domains. AAT establishes new occupations for the client such as grooming, exercising and feeding the animal; and careful selection of the animal for AAT demonstrates client-centred practice (Velde et al., 2005). A systematic review by Johnson et al. (2002) uncovered that AAT is associated with increasing an individual's physiological and psychological health and well-being.

Animal Assisted Therapy and children

An early report of AAT benefiting a child was provided by Boris Levinson, a psychologist who came to the realisation that the presence of his dog in therapy sessions assisted him in building rapport and liaising with a young client (Heimlich, 2001). Dr. Gladys Blue reviewed literature to find that animal interactions are beneficial to a growing child as they facilitate love, attachment, non-verbal communication, friendship, grief, and the life cycle, as well as ethical responsibility (Pitts, 2005). Animals are also reported to be significant to the social and cognitive development of children (Martin & Farnum, 2002), and generally children display innate attention to animals and other elements of their non-human environment. Five year old children are reported to identify their own pets as an opportunity for emotional support, and pet ownership in this age group is associated with being able to express more empathy towards those with whom they associate (Sams et al., 2006).

AAT can promote nurturing and socially appropriate behaviour in children (Heimlich, 2001). An AAT specialist and counselling psychologist reported in an interview that a child with oppositional defiant conduct disorder was shown to display emotions and learn suitable methods for demonstrating and dealing with his feelings (Smoyak, 2003). A randomised control trial of AAT for paediatric inpatients in an acute hospital setting gained preliminary evidence that children exposed to AAT had greater sensory input and greater distraction from their ill health (Kaminski et al., 2002). A case study conducted by Richardson (2006) found that AAT using farm animals assisted a young child with autism to relate to friends through taking care of animals. Autism can be described as a developmental disorder which includes difficulties in social interaction (Sams, Fortney, & Willenbring, 2006). A pilot study conducted by Sams et al. (2006) demonstrated that children with autism have a significantly greater use of language, social interaction, and socially

appropriate behaviour in occupational therapy sessions which incorporate AAT, than children with autism who participate in standard occupational therapy interventions.

Animal Assisted Therapy with children in school settings

AAT for children with autism could be adapted for the classroom as it has been shown to assist in keeping children on task and provides useful social interaction (Pitts, 2005). A repeated measure cohort study with students in their individual school setting was conducted by Martin & Farnum (2002). Students who participated in the study were diagnosed with different forms of pervasive developmental disorder – a disorder demonstrated by impairment in social functioning and interaction. During AAT, child participants appeared to appropriately channel their energy into the therapy dog that they were involved with. They were also more likely to initiate communication and demonstrate excitement if there was a therapy dog present. Children had both increased rates and duration of laughter and arm flapping (thought to demonstrate excitement) during therapy dog intervention sessions when compared to intervention sessions with a stuffed toy dog or a ball.

A report of two case studies for primary school children with emotional disturbances revealed that inclusion of weekly AAT in their school routine assisted children to improve their verbal and non-verbal communication, confidence, relationships with peers, age appropriate behaviour and increase attention to task (Kogan et al., 1999). AAT has been adopted by speech pathologists working with primary school aged children to assist communication (Lewis, 2003; Scott et al., 2005; Shafer, 2006). AAT is also reported to assist in facilitating sensory integration (Shafer, 2006) and motor skills of children (Scott et al., 2005).

Literacy and Animal Assisted Therapy

The Commonwealth Government of Australia holds the view that the minimum educational standards should be achievable by all students. It has been identified that if children with learning difficulties are to meet national standards, their individual and specialised requirements need to be met during the early learning years. Deficient literacy skills impact upon all aspects of the education of children (Kelly & Fallows, 1998). Ignoring literacy problems in primary school severely impacts the individual's ability to complete secondary school and further studies (Coleman, 1997; Halonen, Aunola, Ahonen, & Nurmi, 2006; Moni, Van Kraayenoord, & Baker, 2002; Pogorzelski & Wheldall, 2005). A program using therapy dogs in schools called 'Dogs in Education Assisting with Literacy' (DEAL) involves dogs and their volunteers conducting weekly classroom visits in schools. In a pilot study with three schools, the program resulted in students improving listening, reading and writing skills, thus improving occupational performance (Scott, Haseman, & Hammetter, 2005).

The use of therapy dogs motivates students to participate in therapy activities which include literacy (Scott et al., 2005). AAT in schools is designed to incorporate literacy achievement through children reading to the therapy dog and writing stories about the therapy dog (Scott et al., 2005). Children with unique needs (such as learning difficulties and mild intellectual disability) are reported to benefit from AAT in a school-based program (Gasalberti, 2006).

Animal Assisted Therapy and truancy

Non-attendance has been identified as a problem in primary and secondary school aged children (Langsford, Douglas, & Houghton, 1998). Students who are truant have been shown to participate in increased risk-taking behaviour from as young as grade two (Langsford et. al., 1998). There is a decrease in student truancy rates on days where therapy dogs visit schools (Brodie & Biley, 1999) as it motivates student participation (Scott et al., 2005).

Gaps in the Literature

There is a growing evidence-base of literature which supports the use of animal assisted therapy (AAT) across a variety of health care settings (Johnson et al., 2002; Jorgenson, 1997). The majority of this evidence is in the form of qualitative pilot studies (Scott et al., 2005), although there are some randomised controlled trials (eg, Cole et al., 2007). There are few published studies regarding volunteers taking dogs into mainstream schools to improve school performance of the students. This report presents research exploring volunteer perceptions through interview and children's perceptions through drawings, of how AAT in primary schools affected the performance of the students who participated and how AAT assists in early childhood literacy. In 2009, teachers and principals will be interviewed on their views of the benefits of AAT in their school as well as objective measures of student performance.

A Study Investigating the Delta Classroom Canines™ program

The Geelong/Bellarine branch of the Delta Society Australia has set up a program that integrates therapy dogs into mainstream primary schools. To ensure that the program is relevant to the students, they have recently developed a more specific program known as the Delta Classroom Canines™ program. This program is directly focused on working with students during the reading programs which are already set up in their classroom curricula. The nature of interventions with the dog has flexibility and most students in the class get to spend time with the therapy dog when the dog visits the classroom with their handler.

Overall Aims of the Study

The Delta Society requested that a study be conducted to investigate the program in mainstream schools to see what benefits resulted from the program. The purpose of this report is to present the findings of this study. The overall aims of the study were to:

- a) Investigate the perceived benefits of the program from the volunteers viewpoint
- b) Investigate the child's view of the perceived benefit of the program
- c) Investigate the teachers' and principals' view of the perceived benefit of the program
- d) To record changes in children's well-being as they were involved in the program.

The points a) and b) are reported in this report. Data collection for points c) and d) begin in February 2009. Full ethical approval was given in late September 2008, leaving little time to complete the project in 2008. Hence, this report presents the findings to date with all the findings presented at the conclusion of 2009.

Specific Aims for points a) and b)

The research question under investigation is as follows: 'What are the perceived benefits of the Delta Society's Classroom Canines program in primary schools in the Geelong/Bellarine region from the perspectives of the program volunteers and the primary school children?' In order to answer this question, the study focussed on the following:

1. Identify possible benefits of therapy dogs being integrated into classroom curriculum for primary school students in the Geelong/Bellarine region.
2. Understand what is special about therapy dogs which allows these possible benefits for both the student participants and the program volunteers.
3. Provide a platform for further research into the benefits and use of therapy dogs in mainstream primary schools.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants because specific knowledge of the Delta Classroom Canines™ program was necessary to answer the question.

Volunteers

The sample included four volunteers from the Delta Society's Geelong/Bellarine Branch who participate in the Delta Classroom Canines™ program. The demographics of the participants are outlined in Table 1. All participants were aged between 40 and 65 years with the mean age being 53.75 years. Pseudonyms have been used for both the names of the volunteers and their dogs to maintain the privacy of the participants.

Table 1. Volunteer Demographics

| Volunteer | Dog | Prior experience | Volunteering Experience |
|-----------|--------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Sharyn | Boris | Retired teacher | 4 years |
| Camilla | Jake and Kia | Retired health care professional | 4 years |
| Rebecca | Jasmine | Shop service assistant | 4 years |
| Julie | Ebony | Retired health care professional | 4.5 years |

Children

Grade one students from the classes who had the Delta Classroom Canines™ program integrated into their curricula were invited to participate. There were over 100 drawings collected from six classrooms across four primary schools in the Geelong/Bellarine region. The student participants did not have to be directly involved in the Delta Classroom Canines™ program itself, so long as the therapy dog participated in other aspects of their classroom curricula.

Instrumentation

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for gaining information from the volunteers' of their speciality knowledge regarding the use of therapy dogs in mainstream primary schools (Minichiello, Madison, Hays & Parmenter, 2004). Semi-structured interviews are carried out in a conversational manner and allow exploration of the perspectives of the participants (Grbich, 1999; Minichiello et. al., 2004).

Use of drawings was selected for primary school student participation as it is an age appropriate and classroom appropriate activity. Drawing a picture is non evasive on both the student participants and the classroom environment (Rollins, 2005).

Stance of the Researcher

The research was conducted by students and staff from the Occupational Science and Therapy program at Deakin University. No students or staff were involved in the Delta Classroom Canines™ program.

Procedure

Ethical clearance to conduct the research was granted from Deakin University Human Ethics Advisory Group – Faculty of Health, Medicine, Nursing and Behavioural Sciences and the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Following ethical clearance, volunteers from Delta Society's Classroom Canines™ program were contacted through the volunteer coordinator for the Geelong/Bellarine branch of the Delta Society Australia. The volunteers were contacted by phone to be invited to participate. Those who agreed were sent an information pack which contained a formal letter of invitation to participate, a plain language

statement about the research and a consent form. Data collection from program volunteers took place at a time of their convenience in their homes, with their dog/s present in September of 2008.

Prior to the scheduled interviews, the participants were given confirmation phone calls to ensure they had received the appropriate information and that they were happy to proceed. Before the interview commenced with each volunteer participant, the participants returned the signed consent forms and had an opportunity to ask any questions. The volunteers then participated in audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews according to the interview guideline in Table 2. The interviews lasted between 20 and 50 minutes in duration. Written notes were also taken throughout the interview process and these were read back to the participants immediately following the interview (Britten, 2006).

Table 2. Semi-Structured Interview Question Guide for Volunteers

-
1. How did you learn of the Delta dog program?
 2. Why did you choose to volunteer for the program?
 3. Did you have any hesitations to volunteering? If so what were they?
 4. Before your volunteering commenced, what did you see as the benefits of being involved? Have these initial, perceived benefits changed? How have they changed?
 5. Have you noticed any improvement in student performance (e.g. truancy or literacy) as a result of the program and how have you noticed this change?
 6. Are there any costs to you for being involved in the program – financial or otherwise (e.g. time)? If so what are the costs?
 7. Have you made any sacrifices in being involved in the program?
 8. Has the implementation of the program changed your daily routine and how?
 9. Would you recommend the program to others to volunteer in? Why or why not?
 10. How do you perceive the teachers to view the program?
-

The audio-tapes of the interviews were transcribed. Copies of the transcripts were externally audited by a third party for checking consistency with the recording (Grbich, 1999). The transcripts were then returned to the volunteer participants for member checking and so they could add or remove any information they felt necessary. Once checked and approved by participants, the transcriptions were returned for analysis. These steps were included in order to ensure credibility of the data (Grbich, 1999). Identifying information was stripped from the data and each participant was given a pseudonym for anonymity. The transcripts were then analysed for trends. This is outlined in the data analysis section. The primary school students were invited to participate in the project by the Delta volunteers' who attended their school. The program volunteers invited the children to draw a picture of 'The day the dog comes to visit the school.' The activity replicated an activity in the grade one students' classroom. All drawings were non-identifiable, that is, no student names were on the drawings. Children could refuse to draw if they wished.

Data Analysis

A number of methods were used to gain a rich and thorough analysis of the data (Law & Philp, 2002). This section will first outline how the data from the program volunteers' interview transcripts were coded for analysis.

Transcript analysis

Constant comparative analysis. The first transcript was read over five times and emerging themes were identified and coded (Punch, 2005). Following the initial five readings of each transcript, previously read transcripts were re-read in order to ensure all emerging themes were identified. During the process of constant comparison, open coding was used as a starting point to break down the data (Punch, 2005).

Open coding. Theoretical possibilities were given a provisional conceptual category as a code (Punch, 2005). These were used to create abstract concepts, and supported by quotes from the interview transcripts. Concept codes from each transcript were then compared. Abstract codes generated during the open coding phase were broken down into simpler concepts. These concepts were given a new code. The new codes were then compared across all the transcripts to see if the same concepts had been identified by all participants.

Selective coding. Selective coding is the final stage in coding the participant's interview transcripts. These final codes became the key themes that are reported.

'Doing, Being, Becoming, Belonging'

The 'Doing, Being, Becoming, and Belonging' model (Wilcock, 2006) was used as a lens to understand the data. Wilcock (2006) considers that doing, being, becoming and belonging are essential for a human's survival and health. Essentially, this model theorises that 'doing' an activity is beneficial to the 'do-er' and that health and well-being are improved if individuals are involved in meaningful 'doing' for them. "Being' is about being true to ourselves, to our nature, to our essence and to what is distinctive about us to bring to other as part of our relationships and to what we do" (Wilcock, 1999, p. 5). 'To be' requires time to discover who we are, time to think, reflect and exist (Wilcock, 1999). 'Being' is about enjoyment in what we 'do'.

'Doing' and 'being' compliment each other. If a person cannot 'do', then it is difficult for that person 'to be'. 'Becoming' is the potential for growth (emotionally, physically, cognitively), of transformation into a participating member of society, and self-actualisation of who one is (Wilcock, 1999). By 'becoming', people can contribute to society. By becoming, people can 'belong' and participate. They can belong to their peer group, their interest group, their society group, and their family group. Doing, being, becoming and belonging give a sense of spirituality or meaning to a person's activities. Meaningful activities are seen as a basic human need which is linked with health and well-being (Wilcock, 2006).

The 'doing, being, becoming and belonging' in human life are the foundations for how health and well-being are promoted in individuals. Community development influences doing,

being, becoming and belonging. Community development will impact the population's survival and health through what its members 'do' as well as what they are being, becoming and belonging (Wilcock, 2006). If the constructs of doing, being, becoming and belonging are met for individuals, then their health and well-being are positively promoted.

Drawing Analysis

Drawings have been used to identify common inter-group trends and values (Payne, 1996).

The drawings were analysed according to:

1. Colours: the colours that were used in the drawing
2. Description of picture: a brief description of what was represented in the drawing
3. Size comparison: the relative size of the characters in the picture to each other characters

Summary

This study aimed to understand whether and how animal assisted therapy influences the well-being of the program volunteers and the students they serve in mainstream schools. It explored whether the Delta Classroom Canines™, as community program carried out in mainstream primary schools, increased the well-being of the program volunteers and the students.

Results

Introduction

The results are presented in key themes and then data are re-analysed through the lens of 'Doing, Being, Becoming, and Belonging'.

Research Question

To recap, the research question is: 'What are the perceived benefits of the Delta Society's Classroom Canines™ program in primary schools in the Geelong/Bellarine region from the perspectives of the program volunteers and school children?'

Summary of Key Themes

Five key themes were identified. The first theme called 'Increased enjoyment and improved classroom performance' identified that from the perspectives of the volunteers the students enjoyed participating in classroom activities with the therapy dogs present and that it increased the quality of their work.

Second, the presence of the volunteers and the therapy dogs provided extra support to the teachers and facilitated additional opportunities for student learning. This theme is called 'Extra support for students' learning'.

Thirdly, the company of the therapy dogs provided emotional support to the students as the dogs are perceived as being non-judgemental in their nature. This theme is called 'Therapy dogs listen to me'.

The fourth theme called, 'Rewarding for the volunteers', was the benefit of the Delta Classroom Canines™ program to the people who volunteer. Volunteers found participation in classroom based animal assisted therapy a rewarding experience. They described this as a way they are able to contribute, to 'give back to the community'.

The final theme, called 'The dog as the therapeutic medium', expounded on the qualities unique to therapy dogs in a mainstream primary school environment.

Themes

Increased enjoyment and improved classroom performance

The students were eager to have the therapy dog/s visit the classroom as illustrated by the following quotes:

"The kids just absolutely adore the dogs. Even the children I don't see come up and ask if they can... come and cuddle the dogs" *Camilla*.

“General classroom students, well they are very focused on Jasmine and they are really actually very eager to please... to impress, to show off their skills and they are really comfortable with us.” *Rebecca*.

“The children are always very happy to come to me because they want to see the dogs.” *Camilla*

The presence of the therapy dog reduced anxiety in the students about their performance in classroom activities. Classroom activities with the dog present appeared to be more fun and appealing to the students which lifted their performance. This is demonstrated in discussions with Julie and Sharyn.

“They tend to relax a lot more when you are reading because it sort of is a lot more fun. And they are patting her all the time so they are not so worrying about reaching the word, so it is non-judgemental and you are saying you are actually reading to Ebony and Ebony likes that story.” *Julie*.

“There was this one little girl... the teacher thought she could read better than she did when she read to the teacher, because she would get really nervous, she really wanted to please the teacher so she didn't want to acknowledge that she didn't understand a word... When I sat down with her and she read to Boris, the teacher got a real indication of what her reading ability was because she wasn't worried about reading to Boris. She wasn't trying so hard to please him that she didn't want to make a mistake; she was more relaxed and just reading.” *Sharyn*.

Sharyn shared experiences giving examples of the student enjoyment of the program.

“A little boy that I have been working with recently who is really interacting with Boris beautifully and he will say “can you guess what is going to happen next Boris? I'm not going to tell you!” He is just really enjoying his reading because he makes it this challenge with Boris and you can see that it has become a lot of fun for him.” *Sharyn*.

Camilla discussed how the presence of the therapy dog relieves the pressure on the students to perform.

“So it becomes like an ice-breaker. The dogs replace that just one to one, feeling the pressure. I have been in the program for about three years now I have seen what its like and just how the children respond to the dogs.”

Camilla.

Sharyn and Julie both discussed that the time with the therapy dogs improved the confidence of the students.

“They read the story to Boris and they give him a reward at the end if he listens well. So they are put in the role of being in charge. So that it gives them a chance to be (in charge) instead of reading and perhaps being nervous about it and all that sort of thing it gives them the confidence that they are doing the reading, Boris has got to be a good listener so they are watching to see if he is listening while they are reading.” *Sharyn.*

“I see children open up and gain more confidence in reading and social interaction” *Julie.*

“Kids became a little bit more confident, and the ones that had learning difficulties or ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder) seemed to settle a little bit better.” *Julie*

Sharyn also discussed the teachers' appreciation of the program.

“Most of them [teachers] want us to continue because they can really see it [the Delta Classroom Canines™ program] working... the teachers are loving it, the kids are loving it” *Sharyn.*

Time spent with the therapy dog was also used as an incentive for students to complete their work so that they could then spend time with the dog.

“He [a student] used to come into the room where Boris was so he would bring his work down and his teacher found it was a good incentive to make him get more work done too because he couldn't go and see Boris until he got his work done.” *Sharyn.*

Extra support for students' learning

The volunteers discussed how the program provided extra support for the students' education.

“For the children I could see that it was a great opportunity to help them gain confidence, to perhaps work on some skills directed by the teacher in any areas that she or he thought they may need some help.” *Sharyn*.

Rebecca also discussed how the program provided extra facilitation for student learning, beyond the time that she and her dog visited the classroom.

“What happens too is that we don't just work with the children while we are there... there is also an afterwards scene... so realistically things can be going on even when we are not there but as a direct result of our visit. For instance, with one particular boy, he is high functioning Asperger's, so after we went they produced a piece of work reflecting our visit, and then it was... shown to me the next week.” *Rebecca*.

Camilla discussed how her background as a therapist has added extra assistance to students requiring speech therapy.

“Once the school found out I used to work as a speech therapist they thought wow! I (with the dogs) actually began doing work for a while with some children who did have sound problems. The speech pathologist attends once every three weeks due to the work load and she asked if I could back her up and I agreed. It was a mix of some artic [articulation] problems, literacy problems. Most of the children I did see did respond very well, and I still have a few I am... seeing.” *Camilla*.

The volunteers explained how the teachers view the program as beneficial to student learning.

“I think they [class teachers] see children enjoying going to reading, I think they see that it is a help. It's a support to them because they don't always have the time to give these children a little bit extra. It gives the children a bit of special time as well. And I think it is nice to see children going to something with a big smile on their face, confident to go and read, coming back, having enjoyed it, so it helps their self esteem as well. So I think the teachers can

see that, they can see the affect on the child as a person as well as hopefully having some affect on their reading ability.” *Sharyn*.

The teachers are supported by volunteers and the therapy dogs when they are in the classroom, which in turn supports the learning of the students in the classroom.

“The two young teachers that I am working with at the moment... are absolutely fabulous, they love the program and they love the dog.” *Julie*.

Camilla provided examples of how the program has been used to assist student learning in alternative situations.

“I have had one little girl who missed Term 1 for various reasons and they wanted me to help her catch up... There is another little boy and he has symptoms of Asperger’s. I always work ... trying to improve his interaction skills and direct eye contact. The teacher appreciates it because he sits in the classroom and is just in his own little world. He doesn’t get on with his work. He is very bright as these children can often be but he just takes his own time to do it. What I try to do (with the therapy dogs) is complete projects with him.”
Camilla.

The volunteers discussed how they promote the time with the therapy dogs to be used in the classroom to maximise students opportunity for learning.

“I have found that some teachers don’t know what to do with Ruby and myself when we arrive, so I learnt to ask the question ‘What would you like me to do today?’ If you are unsure I have found that it works well if I join in on the lesson for an hour and help the kids with their work by going around the classroom from table to table.’ That way we aren’t disrupting the class, but really being able to help.” *Julie*.

“I usually work with children who are struggling a bit with their reading... And I work through Boris.” *Sharyn*.

“There are two other children I used to see and they had problems in the classroom with taking turns, or waiting to be asked. I worked with those dynamics in that little group (with the dogs) and hopefully taught them how to sit back and wait to be asked and wait to have turns.” *Camilla*.

Therapy dogs listen to me

The therapy dogs provided emotional support to students. The time students spent with the therapy dogs had a tendency to lead to students opening up and discussing non-curriculum related material.

“They tend to tell you lots of other things. Like while they are reading they tend to bring up things about their family or something that is happening at home so a lot of emotional stuff will come up.” *Julie.*

“The kids really seem to have trust with the dog, when we are reading they tend to open up to Ruby and confide things in her that they wouldn’t tell their teacher.” *Julie.*

Camilla discussed how she maximised the opportunities for students to gain an opportunity to engage in open discussion.

“Very often children will start talking about things if we [Camilla and the dogs] have time to go for a walk. The setting allows a freedom of speech because they are walking along with the dog and you might ask, or pose questions intentionally which can result sometimes in information that can be quite interesting for the teachers getting some background on the child.” *Camilla.*

Sharyn and Rebecca related how teachers optimise the opportunity for students to open up and have emotional support from the presence of the therapy dogs.

“If there is a child that is having difficulties at home, something’s happened, death in the family, all that sort of thing the teachers often ask if Boris can spend some time with them. And the children do like to just make a fuss of him but while they are doing that they will also perhaps also open up a bit than what they normally would and just have a chat and express some of their feelings.” *Sharyn.*

“The child had recently lost their own family pet... that’s really good [reading to Jasmine the therapy do] because they talk about the pet that they have lost.” *Rebecca.*

Julie reflected on how student’s confidence was positively influenced by the presence of the therapy dog.

“The ones [students] were really shy, they seem to gain more confidence because the dog would gravitate to that child, so... they would become more popular with the other children.” *Julie.*

Rewarding for the volunteers

Volunteers reported that the program was rewarding for them in a number of ways. The program was rewarding because they give back to the community, they spent time with their dogs, and they felt that they are doing something good for their dogs in the process. The volunteers spoke of this specifically.

“There are the social benefits, and there is the feeling of satisfaction that you are doing something worthwhile and helping other people but it is also fun.” *Julie.*

“I get things from it (volunteering) that I don’t get from my work.... The thing about dogs is that they sort of bring out your own humanity, so it is quite an enriching experience... something to give back to the community and also it would be good for Jasmine because she is a very sociable dog and she really enjoys meeting people and I thought she was getting bored just being stuck at home.” *Rebecca.*

“...obviously it is all the things I love to do anyway so it’s generated a lot of interest for me as well.” *Camilla.*

“It’s time that you spend with your dog and you learn things about your dog too which is great, and its time to spend with children and to give something to children and you do get a lot back from it too.” *Sharyn.*

The only costs identified by the volunteers were time and personal financial costs such as the petrol used for travelling to the schools and making books and stickers for the students. The volunteers’, however, counteracted the time and financial costs by the positive responses they received from the students, such as students pleasure in their presence in the classroom and from when the students received the books and stickers.

“There is the petrol cost but if you are going to volunteer you are going to have to go somewhere, so that doesn’t worry me... When I first started I did books

about Boris, that were left in the classroom and the children just loved reading those books.... I was happy to do it.” *Sharyn*.

Having the dog as the therapeutic medium

The volunteers emphasised how they perceived the dog as the therapeutic medium. The qualities of the dog facilitated the students’ interest in participation.

“I know how people, generally children, respond to dogs.I saw the benefit as the dog being the medium, I am the handler and there is the dog. I am not a teacher, I am not a parent and I am not any relative. I am this lady who has two dogs... I realise a dog can break down a barrier with a child and their communication can often be more forthcoming because they talk to the dog.”
Camilla.

“I work through Boris so if we talk about the story or the meaning of the words and I will say “can you tell Boris what the story is about” or “Boris might not be sure of that word, can you tell Boris what it means.” Those sorts of things. So they are not open to criticism because they are telling the dog so that helps them.” *Sharyn*.

“Ebony provides a buffer zone between me and the children. She gives unconditionally, is always happy, non-judgemental and she often seeks out the least popular children in a class.” *Julie*.

Sharyn provided examples of how the students responded directly to the dog.

“The children are delightful, and they enjoy you coming; mind you it is Boris. We arrive at the door and its Boris, Boris, Boris. It gets really focused on the dog.” *Sharyn*.

“These are grade one children, and I think they must think I am just a silly old lady talking to this dog... but I was doing some spelling with... a little boy and the teacher had asked me to check his spelling words because he hadn’t gone very well the week before... so he was sitting on his chair, I was kneeling down and Boris was lying down beside me. So I had his spelling list and I would say ‘Boris, pick a word. Boris said THE; write me THE’ and he would write THE and then ‘oh look he got it right, next word’ and I did this about six times and then I thought ok, so I just picked a word, and I said ‘was,’ and then

he gave it to me and he said “Boris didn’t pick that word,” and I said “oh ok,” so back I went [to using Boris]. So that sort of just showed to me although I might just be a silly lady talking to a dog the children really do relate to it, the dog working with them.” *Sharyn*.

Examples of the dog being the therapeutic medium were provided in regards to children who were less integrated into classroom activities than their peers.

“It [Jasmine the therapy dog] gives him [a student] a connection with the rest of the class, so like a bridge I suppose.” *Rebecca*.

“There have been times where the classroom teacher has said to me that they have noticed one particular child that is so different when Boris is thereAnd the teacher said that the child was withdrawn, day dreamy and not involved most of the time, and when Boris was there they see them tuned in, expressions on their faces, interacting with Boris and myself and the teacher said it was great for them to be able to see that side of the child that they hadn’t necessarily seen very often before.” *Sharyn*.

“Another thing that I really see is how Ebony gravitates to certain children and it is usually the ones who are ... less popular with the other kids because they are shy or don’t have the same amount of social skills. She also gravitates to the children who have learning difficulties and sort of inappropriate social behaviour.” *Julie*.

“Boris gives stickers to the children who have read and they put them on and they say ‘I’ve read to Boris today,’ so they look forward to getting those.” *Sharyn*.

Students’ Drawings

There were two key themes which emerged from the drawings completed by the student participants of the Delta Society’s Classroom Canines™ program.

Enjoyment of the Delta Classroom Canines™ program

The drawings portrayed reading and mathematics activities with the students [people figures] and therapy dogs. The dogs were drawn engaging in activities, including exercises working at the tables, walking in the playground and reading groups. From the children’s perspective the dogs were actively engaged in the classroom activities.

Seeing the dogs as the therapeutic/learning medium

In over half of the drawings, the image of the dog was drawn the same size or bigger than the people represented in the pictures. The dogs were also depicted as active participants in the learning process.

Volunteers: Doing Being Becoming Belonging

Table 3 presents the data from the volunteers in the model of 'Doing,' 'Being,' 'Becoming,' and 'Belonging,' from their participation in the Delta Classroom Canines™ program.

Table 3

The Doing, Being, Becoming and Belonging of volunteers in the Delta Classroom Canines™ program

| Doing | Being | Becoming | Belonging |
|--|--|--------------------------------------|---|
| Doing something that contributes to the community | Productive members of the community | Masters of the craft of volunteering | To the Delta Society Geelong/Bellarine branch |
| Doing something helpful for the students and the teachers at the schools | Facilitators of learning and engagement in classroom occupations | | To the classes and schools where they volunteer |

Doing

The volunteers are involved with 'doing' while they perform their role with the primary school students. The volunteers reported that they felt they were 'doing' something worthwhile where they could contribute to their local community. They also felt as though they were 'doing' something helpful for the students and the teachers in the schools they volunteered at.

Being

The volunteers took much enjoyment in their participation of the Delta Classroom Canines™ program and stated that they were 'being' productive members of the community. Volunteers deep felt satisfaction from their dogs and themselves being wanted in the schools to facilitate student learning. This was apparent in the interview with Sharyn;

"I do love it, I love going in and being a part of the classroom, mixing with the children, watching their enjoyment of Boris but not having the responsibility of being a teacher." *Sharyn.*

Becoming

There was no obvious 'becoming' of the volunteers as a construct, however the volunteers felt they were 'becoming' masters of the craft of volunteering with their dogs in the schools. This emerged through the interview with Julie.

“I have found that some teachers don’t know what to do with Ruby and myself when we arrive, so I learnt to ask the question ‘what would you like me to do today?’ If you are unsure I have found that it works well if I join in on the lesson for an hour and help the kids with their work by going around the classroom from table to table.” That way we aren’t disrupting the class, but really being able to help.” *Julie.*

Belonging

The volunteers were 'belonging' to both a rewarding organisation and the schools they were integrated into. Sharyn discussed being invited to a school event with her therapy dog.

"Yesterday [Primary School] had a community day so they invited us to go and it was great because the grades were divided up right across the school ... and they were moving around the school so they asked us to go, so it was a good chance for us to mix in with some of the older children as well, and the older children were looking after the little children. And the little children knew Boris so they were telling the older children all about Boris so it was lovely for to go and be a part of that." *Sharyn.*

The pictures drawn by the students depicted the volunteers, therapy dogs, and children. This was interpreted as demonstrating the belonging of the volunteers and therapy dogs as a part of the class when they come to visit the school.

Students: Doing, Being, Becoming, Belonging

The Doing, Being, Becoming, Belonging model (Wilcock, 2006) was used to interpret data gathered through drawings and volunteer interviews. Table 4 summarises the findings.

Table 4

The Doing, Being, Becoming and Belonging of students from having the Classroom Canines program integrated into their classroom curricula.

| Doing | Being | Becoming | Belonging |
|--|---|---|---|
| Fun and enjoyable classroom curriculum | Emotionally supported | More engaged, confident and better performers in reading and other classroom activities | To the Delta Classroom Canines™ program |
| Meaningful school based occupations | Supported with reading and other classroom activities | More integrated with peers | |

Doing

The drawings showed the volunteers as 'doing' meaningful classroom activities with the children. These activities include reading, walking the dog, working at the table top and even doing chemistry projects with the therapy dogs and the volunteers.

Being

Time spent with the dog encourages the students to open up and discuss their feelings and emotions as the dog is not placing the judgement on them in relation to what they say. The

students' pictures often had smiles on the children's faces as they interacted with the dog during activities such as reading.

The Delta Classroom Canines™ program allows 'being' through 'doing' for the grade one primary school students as they get to be a productive member of the classroom from doing meaningful occupations such as reading, maths and learn skills such as turn taking and articulation (Wilcock, 2006).

Becoming

The volunteers see the students as 'becoming' engaged in their classroom which in turn is assisting the students in 'becoming' better readers and more confident with their school work, They are also 'becoming' more integrated with their peers as the therapy dog can have a tendency to gravitate to the children who are more shy and less confident to interact with their classmates.

'Becoming' integrated with peers can also occur when the therapy dogs are used to teach turn taking through playing games with the dog where students had to wait their turn or they would miss out on spending time with the dog.

"There are two other children ... they really used to have problems in the classroom like taking turns, or waiting to be asked and that sort of thing, so I worked with those dynamics ... hopefully taught them how to sit back and wait to be asked and wait to have turns..." *Camilla.*

The volunteers reported that the teachers who saw students inclined to tune out during classroom activity becoming more engaged when the therapy dog was in the room.

"The teacher said that the child was withdrawn, day dreamy and not involved most of the time, and when Boris was there they see them tuned in.." *Sharyn.*

Belonging

The students who participate in the Delta Classroom Canines™ program 'belong' to a unique experience and opportunity to engage in meaningful occupations through the presence of a therapy dog.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the medium of a therapy dog is able to provide support to students' learning. Students enjoyed participating in classroom activities with the therapy dogs present. This in turn, increased the quality of their work. The students were more confident and less anxious when the therapy dogs were involved in classroom activities. This presence relieved the pressure on the students to perform so that they could become better at learning.

The presence of the volunteers and the therapy dogs also provided extra support to the teachers and facilitated additional opportunities for student learning. The teachers were supportive of the volunteers and the therapy dogs when they were in the classroom. Having the therapy dog in the classroom was perceived to be an incentive for students to complete their work so that they could spend time with the dog. The program also provided extra facilitation for student learning, beyond the time that they spent in the classroom, and was used to assist student learning in alternative situations. The background of the volunteers contributed to success, as some of the volunteers used skills from previous occupations together with their role as the handler of a therapy dog.

The company of the therapy dogs provided emotional support to the students, as the dogs were perceived as being non-judgemental in their nature. The time students spent with the therapy dogs could lead to students opening up and discussing non-curriculum related material. The therapy dogs presence positively influenced the students' confidence and maximised their opportunities to engage in open discussion.

The act of volunteering with a therapy dog provided a sense of well-being upon the volunteer. The program was rewarding to the volunteers as they gave back to the community, spent time with the children and gave something back to them, spent time with their dogs and felt that they were doing something good for them in the process.

The volunteers perceived the dog as a therapeutic medium and the dog was the key to success in their role of helping out within that environment. The children responded more directly to the dogs' presence and broke down barriers in the classroom. Such barriers included students' social isolation from peers and anxiety regarding their academic performance.

Benefits from Volunteers' Perspectives

The program volunteers identified three main benefits of the Delta Classroom Canines™ program. These were as follows:

1. Providing support to students in the classroom.
2. A personal sense of well-being from the act of volunteering.
3. The unique offering of having a dog as a therapeutic medium.

These findings substantiate the more subjective and descriptive reports on the benefits of therapy dogs in mainstream primary schools (Johnson et. al. 2002; Jorgensen, 1997; Scott et al., 2005).

Support to students

The initial benefit of the Delta Classroom Canines™ program as identified by the program volunteers' is the extra support, both physical and emotional, that the program offers the students. The therapy dogs were used to promote meaningful classroom activity include reading to the therapy dogs, spelling words chosen by the therapy dog, writing stories about the therapy dog, teaching appropriate classroom behaviour such as waiting to be asked, finishing work in a timely fashion and turn taking in order to spend time with the therapy dog. These findings support Scott et. al. (2005) who reported weekly visits into schools by volunteers and their dogs resulted in students improving listening, reading and writing skills. Language skills, such as articulation of words, were focused on with the presence of the therapy dog during the reading program. The company of the therapy dogs provided emotional support to students in a number of ways, including, increasing students' confidence with classroom activities, expressing emotion, integrating students with poor social skills with their peers, grieving the loss of a family pet or extended family member, and overcoming fear of dogs and other animals.

Personal sense of wellbeing

The act of volunteering with their dogs at primary schools gave a sense of satisfaction about contributing to the community. The volunteers felt rewarded by 'doing' that contributed to their community by assisting school students' learning. They also felt satisfaction from socialising their dogs and 'being' in their dogs' presence. This is consistent with literature on the experience of volunteering which suggests that the act of volunteering provides self fulfilment (Black & Living, 2004). Volunteering as a pet-partner could also be considered to be a promoter for health and wellbeing as they 'became' better at their skills of volunteers and 'belonged' to a school and a valued organisation. Older adult volunteers (those post retirement age), compared to older non-volunteers, evaluate their health more highly and self esteem which is linked to greater health and wellbeing (Warburton et. al., 2001).

Having the dog as a therapeutic medium

The partnership that the volunteers drew from their dogs was recognised as the key to their ability to provide a meaningful service to primary school children. The dog was described as a "buffer zone," "like a bridge," and able to "break down a barrier" with the students. The volunteers each acknowledged a non-specific quality of the therapy dogs which somehow facilitated communication, allowing students to open up and perform at their best. The non-judgemental nature of the dog enabled students to express themselves and perform during tasks where they would otherwise feel anxious to achieve (Mayes, 2000).

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

The strength of this study is the perspectives that were gained from interviewing the multiple volunteers of the program. Most literature surrounding therapy dogs in mainstream primary schools only offers one person's opinion to support the program in place. Data analysis was conducted individually by two researchers and then compared to ensure consistent results were being reported.

As the program is very specific, purposive sampling was required to get the perspectives of the volunteers involved in the program. This meant that the results were more likely to demonstrate support for the Delta Classroom Canines™ program as the volunteers have all been involved for at least three years.

It has been suggested that the analysis of children's drawings is unreliable (Dennis, 1966 as cited in Payne, 1996). This theory has however been reinvestigated and it is now considered that children's drawings are a constructive tool for them to communicate their understanding (Rollins, 2005). It is possible that the subjective nature of describing a drawing could misrepresent what the students were trying to portray. In order to limit bias in the interpretation of the students' drawings they were only commented on as a whole. Reported themes were in a majority of the drawings.

Suggestions for Future Research

The research presented in this report is part of a larger project. Over the next 12 months, the perspectives of the school teachers and school principals will be sought to determine their perception of the Delta Society's Classroom Canines™ program, and why they choose to implement it in their schools. Also further quantitative measures will be taken of children's performance.

There is evidence to suggest that animal assisted therapy in a primary school setting may lower truancy rates. Such data will be followed up this year with the schools involved in the program. A larger study is recommended to determine whether or not there is a difference in the performance of primary school students who have the Delta Classroom Canines™ program integrated into their schools curriculum and those who do not. This could be achieved primarily through comparison of improvement levels in reading programs and/or improvements in truancy rates.

The replication of this study should be reproduced in regions where similar programs involving volunteers and therapy dogs in mainstream primary schools are in place to see if the findings are limited to the Geelong/Bellarine region, or if they can be generalised to a larger population.

Conclusion

This report was in response to a noted gap in present literature surrounding the use of animal assisted therapy in mainstream primary schools. The study answered the research

question 'What are the perceived benefits of the Delta dog program in primary schools in the Geelong/Bellarine region from the perspectives of the program volunteers and the primary school children?' The results of the study demonstrated a number of perceived benefits of the Delta Society's Classroom Canines™ program. These include: support to students and teachers in a primary school class, a personal sense of well-being from the act of volunteering and the experience of a dog as a therapeutic medium. These results were discussed in relation to the 'doing,' 'being,' 'becoming,' and 'belonging' of the volunteers and students (Wilcock, 2006).

In 2009 research into the benefits of animal assisted therapy in mainstream primary schools will incorporate perspectives of teachers and school principals. This study, so far, has demonstrated benefits of the participation of therapy dogs in mainstream school for the learning of children and community participation for volunteers.

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