University of Alberta

Grade 2 children experience a classroom-based animal-assisted literacy mentoring program: An interpretive case study

by

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DEDICATION

To my family:

Scott, Sparky, and Tango;

Mom, Dad, and Chris.

ABSTRACT

Despite the growing popularity of animal-assisted literacy programs in North America and abroad, little research has examined how children experience these programs or what their significance may be for participating children in the elementary classroom context. Designed as an interpretive case study into one Grade 2 classroom over 10 weeks, this study explored the questions: How do children experience literacy learning with a dog and an adult mentor? What significance do animal-assisted literacy learning experiences have for children? Drawing on contemporary, cross-disciplinary research exploring the human-animal-bond (HAB) with children in school and therapeutic settings and research examining school-based mentoring programs, this study explored the potential for unique forms of social, emotional, and academic support for children when they engaged in animal-assisted literacy learning sessions.

This dissertation is presented in a series of four papers, each of which align with and attend to unique aspects of the research questions, in addition to an introductory chapter and a concluding chapter. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the study and of the papers selected for inclusion in this dissertation. Chapter 2 sets the context for the study by introducing the supporting research and common concerns and criticisms of animal-assisted programs with children, and explores the distinguishing features and underlying assumptions associated with these programs. Chapter 3 introduces contemporary research focused on school-based mentorship programs with children and examines how mentorship research may inform animal-assisted literacy programs, and Chapter 4 offers a detailed description of the study design and an in-depth discussion of data collection and analysis. Chapter 5 outlines four main themes which emerged inductively from the study data presented through the lens of Bakhtin's carnival, and Chapter 6 reflects back on the previous chapters in discussion of the implications and potential contributions of

this study on literacy research, research exploring animal-assisted programs with children, and on research examining school-based mentorship programs.

Insights from this study suggest that animal-assisted literacy mentoring programs can offer children valuable forms of social, emotional, and academic support in the classroom context. Specifically, four main themes emerged inductively from the data: (1) Animal-assisted literacy sessions drew the consistent and enthusiastic participation of all of the children in the classroom and were viewed as anticipated escapes from typical school routines; (2) These sessions invited playful, imaginative literacy teaching and learning opportunities for group participants; (3) Novel and familial modes of interrelationship within these sessions transformed the network of relationships among group members, and finally; (4) The students' positive, transformative associations with literacy in the broader school context and in their home literacy lives collectively contributed to a carnivalesque climate of literacy support.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Animal-Assisted Literacy Learning: Drawing from Diverse Disciplines

[A]nimals seem to be able to cause a profound change in the atmosphere... The children and adolescents may feel transported into an atmosphere that is characterized by warmth, acceptance, and empathy (Prothmann, Bienert, & Ettrich, 2006, p. 275).

All children need supportive interaction with caring adults to learn and grow (Ellis, Small-McGinley, & De Fabrizio, 2001, p. 43).

Like a quiet underground movement, the popularity of animal-assisted literacy mentoring programs continues to grow across North America and abroad. To date, animal-assisted literacy programs have been established in 4 Canadian provinces, 43 U.S. states, and in Australia, the U.K., Italy, and in India (Land of PureGold Foundation, 2011). Yet despite the global media attention that animal-assisted programs have enjoyed, little research has explored the potential benefits

and concrete practicalities of these programs for literacy learners in classrooms (Friesen, 2009a). The foundation underlying this study of one class of grade 2 students' experiences of animal-assisted literacy learning is supported by two bodies of contemporary research involving children: school-based literacy mentorship, and animal-assisted programs in school and therapeutic environments.

Current research exploring school-based literacy mentoring programs indicates that all children can benefit emotionally, socially, and academically from caring, individualized attention from an adult (Ellis, Small-McGinley, & De Fabrizio, 2001). Concomitantly, a burgeoning field of research exploring the human-animal bond with children in classrooms suggests that interactions with dogs can improve children's general attitudes towards school by modeling unconditional acceptance and trust (Anderson & Olsen, 2006) and can encourage positive student/teacher interaction (Walters-Esteves & Stokes, 2008), while research examining animal-assisted programs with children in therapeutic settings suggests that physical touch, such as when a child strokes a dog, can assist in creating an atmosphere of warmth (Prothmann, Bienert, & Ettrich, 2006). Taken together, this research supports Jalongo's (2004; 2005) argument that animal-assisted literacy mentoring programs may provide a unique form of support for children's literacy outside of the complications and expectations of school and family life (Jalongo, Astorino, & Bomboy, 2004). Indeed, the global popularity of animal-assisted literacy programs may suggest a possible tension between the

supports that children are currently receiving in classrooms and the kinds of assistance they may need or want (Friesen, 2009b, 2010; Jalongo, 2005).

Tango as Teacher[1]

I bring to this study a rich and respectful life history of experiences with animals. My own deep affection for the dogs in my life as a child and the learning experiences with dogs in my own classroom as an educator have inspired this dissertation research into how children experience animal-assisted literacy learning in the classroom context.

When I was a child growing up with a father in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, our family was required to move every year or two. I was seven when I strongly remember having to leave my grade one friends for the small town of Yorkton, Saskatchewan. My parents bought a large, old house, which my brother and I loved to explore and play hide-and-go-seek in. I also remember this house being a constant source of anguish for my Mom because of its constant need for repair. But what I remember most about that year of my life was that it was the year my parents decided our family was ready for a puppy. His name was Patches, and I have tears in my eyes even now as I write about him. A tiny ball of soft white fur with brown patches, he quickly became my best friend. What I remember most about growing up with Patches is that although I was always 'the new kid' and therefore often on the periphery of social groups at school and with friends, he was an "island of constancy" (Melson, 2001) and he always treated me

[1] *A version of p.7-11 in this chapter has been published. Friesen 2009. The Latham Letter 30(4): 14-15.*

with love, warmth, and joy. He helped me to laugh through tears, he accepted me just as I was, and he instantly forgave me when I made many mistakes. He was my little dog. He followed me through the many ups and downs of my teen years, and he waited as I left to explore the world. Then, when I was twenty-one years of age, I held his trembling, fragile, and pain-riddled little body in my arms, as he was euthanized, and I will probably never get over that loss completely.

The depth of my feelings for my pet is reflected in how difficult it was for me to consider getting another dog. It took me seven years to even entertain this possibility. Ironically, the year I felt that I might be ready was the same year that I began teaching elementary school. My new dog's name was Tango; she was a little white Maltese-poodle, and was a gift from my husband. As I introduced her into our lives and let her into my heart, I also felt drawn to share her with my students. My Grade 2 students, who were the same age as I was when I first got Patches, were thrilled and delighted the first time I brought Tango into our classroom. While my students sat perched on the edge of their seats, I told them a little bit about her before answering their many questions: What does she like to eat? Where does she sleep? Can she do tricks? When it came time for her to go, they would begin asking when she could come again. Then it dawned on me. Perhaps my students could earn "Tango Time!"

In an important classroom meeting, we determined that Tango could come back to our classroom every Friday morning if we earned the letters to spell the words "Tango Time" by being kind and respectful to each other throughout the week. We then deliberated about how we should care for Tango in a classroom

full of students. Through negotiation and by taking both the students' and Tango's needs into consideration, we decided that each student (or pair of students, if they liked) would be allowed ten minutes of Tango Time each week. We had a sign-up board that would determine the order of students, and one student would be in charge of keeping track of the stopwatch. During Tango Time, students could choose to play with her, just sit and pet her, talk to her, or if they preferred, they could read a favourite story or an original piece of their draft writing to her in the Reading Corner. The children decided that they shouldn't wear shoes when they had Tango Time, just in case they stepped on one of her tiny paws. We had a rotating schedule for who would get to walk Tango with the teacher during recess, and Tango had a half-hour break in her kennel after the morning recess.

I was a beginning teacher, and I could not have anticipated how this little dog would affect the dynamics of our classroom. I began to notice small developments – the boy who had gotten into fights several times each week during recess became my most responsible dog walker. I received a letter from the mother of a child who had been known to bully others in our class telling me how her son could not stop talking about Tango; in class he had become Tango's gentle protector. Most significantly perhaps, was how several of my boys (who I simply had not been able to yet engage in reading), began bringing books to read to Tango during their ten minutes of Tango Time. Not only this, but I overheard them at recess time arguing over which books Tango liked most (consequently, this began the "Tango's Recommended Books" section of our classroom library, a very popular corner!). As I now reflect on this experience, I wonder if interaction

with Tango seemed to have the greatest effect on the boys in my room because association with animals "is free of the gender-role associations that typecast nurture as an essentially feminine, perhaps quintessentially feminine, enterprise" (Melson, 2001, p. 55). Of course I cared deeply for my students and for my dog and my creativity and imagination was inspired as I observed the developing bond between them. By the end of that school year, many parents had written notes and letters thanking me for bringing Tango into the classroom to share with their children.

I began searching for organizations that might be doing something similar with animals and children in other classrooms. I came across The Intermountain Therapy Animals Association and their Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.) program established in Utah, U.S.A. in November of 1999. The mission of this program is to "improve the literacy skills of children in a unique approach employing a classic concept: reading with a dog" (Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2007, p. 9). I was in the midst of organizing an after-school program for our school when our school's rules changed; no more animals would be allowed in classrooms.

I subsequently taught at the same school for seven years and so never had an opportunity to work with children and my dog again, but I never forgot about that year. In fact, students still come back to me, ask how Tango is doing, and happily recount experiences they had with my dog. It makes me incredibly happy that I was able to give them a little bit of the companionship I experienced with my own dog at that age, and we smile, knowing that we have shared something

very special. With each year of experience I gain as an educator, the more I realize how relationships are at the heart of teaching and learning. The classroom environment, in general, and children's experiences of feeling that they belong, in particular, are essential components in a successful elementary school classroom (Collins, 2004; Friesen, 2008). In fact, although teacher education programs have historically concentrated on the "Three 'Rs' of reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic," a growing body of research suggests that there may be a fourth R – relationships – necessary for children to achieve success in school (Hymel, Schonert-Reichl, & Miller, 2006). However, schools are also places where children are judged on a regular basis; despite a teacher's best efforts to establish a positive classroom climate, report cards and other external pressures such as provincial testing can contradict the warmth and acceptance many teachers work so hard to foster. It is in this spirit of re-imagining literacy learning that I ask educators to "look for themselves beyond the actual, to play with untapped possibilities" (Greene, 1995, p. 48) for how dogs may uniquely support children's learning and development in the classroom context.

Overview of Research Study

Research Questions

This study examined the literacy learning experiences of one class of grade 2 children who interacted with a therapy dog and an adult mentor in their classroom. My research questions were:

- How do the children experience literacy learning with a therapy dog and mentor?
- What significance do animal-assisted learning experiences have for the children in this classroom?

Significance

The Canadian context

At first glance, the outlook for Canadian students with regard to reading proficiency looks very promising. In an international study involving 65 countries, including Canada, the OECD PISA (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Program for International Student Assessment) study (2010) was designed to gain an understanding of how students were performing in mathematics, science, and reading between the years 2000 to 2009. Over 23,000 Canadian students from approximately 1,000 schools took part in the study across the country. As defined by Knighton, Brochu, and Gluszynski (2010) in the OECD PISA study report, the term, 'reading literacy' "is meant to focus on the active, purposeful and functional application of reading in a range of situations and for various purposes" (p. 13).

The results of the 2010 OECD PISA study indicated that only four out of 65 participating countries performed better than Canadian students in combined reading. However, upon closer examination, at the provincial level, Alberta was found to have the largest gap between the highest and lowest performing student. Further, although Canadian students performed significantly better than most

other countries in combined reading skills, the 2010 PISA report indicated that, "one in ten Canadian students do not possess some of the fundamental skills in reading" (p. 21). It is also interesting to note that students who were enrolled in the English-language school system in Canada significantly outperformed students in the French-language school system (Knighton, Brochu, and Gluszynski, 2010). Finally, the results of the 2010 PISA study reinforced previously established gender gaps in reading, with females significantly outperforming Canadian males.

Perhaps most startling is the finding that "reading performance in five of the ten Canadian provinces decreased between 2000 and 2009" (Knighton, Brochu, and Gluszynski, 2010, p. 24), with a significant decrease in scores from students in Alberta. In addition, the proportion of high-achievers in Canada decreased in seven of the ten provinces, including Alberta.

Although Canadian students, overall, are performing significantly better in reading than students in 61 other countries, the results of this study indicate that further research is required to determine how we might offer further support to one in ten children in every classroom who continues to struggle with learning to read, for children who are enrolled in the French-language school system, and for boys who consistently underperform in reading. Further research is also required to understand why the proportion of high-achievers in reading has decreased in Canada over the past decade. This study, which examines how one class of Grade 2 children experienced an animal-assisted literacy learning program in Central Alberta, can offer insight into how animal-assisted programs are experienced by

and may offer unique support for children who are struggling in reading, young boys who consistently underperform in reading, and children who are high-achievers in literacy.

The American context

Literacy skills are a prerequisite for success in life, yet millions of children in America are not reading at grade level (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) Reports for 2009 indicate that although there has been a slight increase in grade 4 proficiency scores, 67 per cent of grade 4 children still do not meet proficiency requirements in reading (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Contemporary literacy scholars suggest that US reforms such as No Child Left Behind have driven the current "insidious obsession to teach literacy through phonics and artificial decodable texts, combined with the narrow focus of textbooks and the perceived goal of teaching literacy to pass a standardized test" (Lehr, 2010, p. 32). This focus on skills-based instruction in primary classrooms forces educators to attend to a constricted set of pre-established outcomes, often at the expense of "other equally or more important areas of development, such as content learning, social development, problem-solving, and other higher-level educational foci" (Hoffman, 2010, p. 10). Despite this emphasis in American education on scientific skills-based literacy over the past decade, schools and educators are beginning to turn away from programs espousing skills-focused notions of literacy learning and towards approaches which invite balanced possibilities for nurturing a more holistic conception of children's literacy development; socially, emotionally, and

academically (Hoffman, 2010; Lehr, 2010; Pickett & Fraser, 2010; Pressley, 2001; Riley & Jones, 2010; Purcell-Gates & Tierney, 2008).

Animal-Assisted Literacy Programs

A reflection of such a shift may be observed in the growing popularity of school-based animal-assisted literacy mentoring programs in the United States in particular, and in countries around the world. Research which explores the benefits for children when interacting with animals in therapeutic, educational, and medical settings has increased over the last thirty years (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007) and collectively suggests that dogs in particular, due to their non-judgemental and highly social nature, can offer a unique form of support to children's learning (Jalongo, Astorino, & Bomboy, 2004). International, innovative programs have been developed that pair reluctant readers with a therapy dog in schools and libraries. The Intermountain Therapy Animals Association (I.T.A., Utah, 1999) has trained hundreds of Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.) and their owners as 'literacy mentor teams' in schools and libraries in states across the U.S. In Canada, organizations such as the Pet Therapy Society of Northern Alberta have developed a "Paws for a Story" (2003) program in Edmonton's public libraries. To date, over four hundred children in the Edmonton area have participated in this program in 12 different locations. Although promising pilot studies of programs based on the I.T.A. model indicate that children enjoy increased reading comprehension and fluency through participating in animal-assisted literacy programs (see for example Gerben, 2003; Hughes, 2002; Martin, 2001; Newlin, 2003) and the popularity of

these programs continues to grow, very few formal research studies have explored what the significance of these learning experiences may be for the participating children.

Further, within the context of animal-assisted literacy programs, 'literacy' is commonly defined as ' reading ' (and reading trade books in particular as opposed to the reading of emerging and original child-authored text). This definition of literacy does not fully align with the Alberta language arts curriculum, nor with the Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada's (LLRC) definition of literacy, which emphasizes that literacy encompasses, at minimum, the six language arts of reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and representing (LLRC, 2008). This dissertation study sought to examine the many ways that children's literacy can be supported as they engaged in the six language arts during animal-assisted literacy mentoring sessions.

Finally, the Intermountain Therapy Animals Association emphasizes that the goal of their R.E.A.D. program is to "improve the literacy skills of children through the assistance of registered therapy teams as literacy mentors" (R.E.A.D., 2010). Although organizers of animal-assisted literacy programs would likely agree that children involved in these programs require attentive and caring support from an adult while reading to the dog, the concept of the adult as literacy mentor is often overshadowed by an emphasis on the developing bond between the child and dog. This dissertation study examined the potential for the adult and dog to serve as literacy mentor teams as defined by Brodkin and Coleman's (1986) definition of mentorship, with a dual focus on relationship development and

education, as: “one who provides one-to-one support and attention, is a friend and role model, boosts a child’s self-esteem, enhances a student’s educational experience” (p. 21).

Philosophical Orientation and Theoretical Framework

Because philosophical differences between paradigms have direct implications for both the conduct and interpretation of research findings, it is crucial that researchers are clear about which paradigm guides their thinking (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). My research is situated in the constructivist paradigm, which, as defined by Guba and Lincoln (1994), assumes that ontologically, realities are multiple, apprehendable, and social, and may change over time as the researcher becomes more informed about the topic of study. This paradigm implies an epistemological assumption that the researcher, as “passionate participant” (Lincoln, 1991), and the research participants are interactively engaged in the reconstruction of previously held constructions with the final aim of gaining a more sophisticated understanding of the topic of study. For social constructivists, knowledge is defined as the continual revision of multiple and co-existing understandings accumulated through engagement in the hermeneutical/dialogical process (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The work of Vygotsky (1978; 1986) played a major role in the framework for this study. This work emphasizes how human cognition and learning are continually shaped by social and cultural experiences. Central to Vygotsky’s theory is the role of interaction between children and their teachers, parents, and

peers in learning environments. As Jaramillo (1996) explains, "intrinsic to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is the notion that social experiences shape the ways that students think and interpret their world" (p. 139). The Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada organization (2008) emphasizes the diverse sociocultural context in which literacy learning occurs in today's schools. All learning takes place in a social context (Vygotsky, 1986), and classrooms are made up of a network of relationships within which students and teachers take on a variety of roles and practices that, in turn, affect children's beliefs and attitudes towards learning. Vytotsky (1986) observes how "every function of a child's cultural development occurs twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological)" (p. 57). In this way, Vygotsky posits that human cognitive functions become internalized when children are provided with opportunities to interact in social relationships.

A second concept central to Vygotsky's (1978; 1986) theory and relevant to my study is that of mediation through language in the social learning environment generally, and the zone of proximal development specifically. Vygotsky (1978) states that it is through language that a child communicates with peers and adults, but it is only through internalization of speech that language can "come to organize a child's thought, that is, become an internal mental function" (p. 89). The concept of mediation "emphasizes the role played by humans and symbolic intermediaries placed between the individual learner and the material to be learned" (Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev & Miller, 2003, p. 3). Because language is

the primary form of communication amongst children and between children and adults, it is when language is internalized that it affects thought. Therefore, it is in the internalization of concepts through mediated experiences with language used socially that a child learns.

Perhaps the most well-known aspect of Vygotsky's (1978) theory is his concept of the zone of proximal development, which he defines as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Most commonly, the zone of proximal development seems to be interpreted as engagement in specific problem-solving environments in which children are able to learn valuable intellectual skills and internalize the assistance they receive. However, Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev and Miller (2003) note that the zone of proximal development is poorly understood because it was used by Vygotsky in three different contexts:

1. for explaining the emerging psychological functions of the child
2. in explaining the difference between the child's individual and aided performances
3. as a metaphoric "space" where everyday concepts of the child meet "scientific" concepts provided by teachers or other mediators of learning (p. 3).

I would hasten to add a fourth way in which Vygotsky demonstrates the application of the zone of proximal development. In his description of play, Vygotsky explains that, "a child's greatest achievements are possible… achievements that tomorrow will become her basic level of real action and morality" (p. 100). Vygotsky states explicitly that "play creates a zone of proximal development in the child. In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself" (p. 102).

Finally, Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes a holistic approach to development which is illustrated in his emphasis on the whole child. He explains that "children solve practical tasks with the help of their speech, as well as their eyes and their hands" (p. 25), and that this "unity of perception, speech, and action" supports the internalization of concepts. Vygotsky (1986) likens the study of thought and word independently of one another to separating the properties of water into its separate elements of hydrogen and oxygen. In this separation the concept of 'water' as a whole is lost, just as "the original properties of verbal thought" disappear in the course of analysis (p. 3). It is not the elements that make up water but the elements interactive behaviour that helps us to understand what water is. In this way, the whole cannot be defined by the sum of its parts.

The holistic emphasis of Vygotsky's theory has direct implications for the literacy classroom. Vygotsky's approach to learning emphasizes that, "by focusing on isolated skills and subskills, the essence of reading and writing…as a 'whole activity' evaporates" (Moll, 1990, p. 6). Instead, teachers should work to

understand how children experience their world and facilitate learning opportunities that match the needs and interests of their students:

> Teachers use thematic holism or networks by posing a theme to students, such as the zoo, where students can respond with subthemes, such as kinds of animals, types of animal noises, and formal script roles of staff. Thematic holism and constructivism's theoretical application to reality is apparent in how teachers and students as humans relate to the learning settings of the formal and natural world. Unlike traditional teaching, Vygotsky would advocate a bottom-up teaching approach where the teacher facilitates, as opposed to directs, what and how students learn concepts both in and out of the classroom. Ideally, teachers would likewise employ participant observations of student actions to inductively and deductively ascertain how informants derive meaning from their social settings (see Erickson, 1986). (Jaramillo, 1996, p. 136)

Teachers in today's literacy classrooms face unique challenges in the changing social environment with increasing cultural, language, and gender differences (The New London Group, 1996). The New London Group (1996) argued that a much broader definition of literacy, termed multiliteracies is required to "get back to the broad question of the social outcomes of language learning" (p. 63). Because the main goal is to encourage full social participation in the literacy classroom, "the issue of differences becomes critically important. How do we ensure that differences of culture, language, and gender are not barriers to educational success? And what are the implications of these differences

for literacy and pedagogy?" (p. 61). The authors noted that the skills required for the work force of the future will be built upon an individual's well-rounded and flexible general skills and on their ability to engage in informal discourse in a complex and integrated environment. Further, The New London Group argued that in contrast to traditional power differences between students and teacher, today's classrooms require relationships of pedagogy which replace "old vertical chains of command" with "horizontal relationships of teamwork" (p. 65) to prepare students for the new demands of the workplace. The influence of Vygotsky's theory is evident in this emphasis on holistic, integrated skills to encourage full participation in "a collective sociality, a new civility in which differences are used as a productive resource and in which differences are the norm" (p. 69). Just as learning cannot be separated from development in the social context nor word isolated from thought; cultural, language and gender differences will need to be "negotiated in such a way that they complement each other" (p. 69) to gain an understanding of the collective, common purpose we all share: peaceful and productive global order (Kalantzis & Cope, 1993).

In addition to Vygotsky's (1978; 1986) sociocultural theory, Bakhtin's (1984a, 1984b) theory of *carnival* gained an increasingly important role as I became more informed about my topic of study. It provided a fascinating lens for the analysis of my research data. A Russian literary theorist, Bakhtin wrote about the essential role that carnival played in the lives of people during the Renaissance and Middle Ages, particularly as "alternative social contexts that could teach us much about how to bust open and transform traditional, closed discourses"

(Lensmire, 1994, p. 371). Bakhtin defined carnival as "the sum total of all diverse festivals, rituals, and forms of a carnival type" (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 122). Far from being simply a trivial and peripheral social activity, he observed that carnival served as the impetus for societal change and, characterized by freedom, equality, and possibility, functioned as a necessary source of renewal for the people who lived with official daily restrictions of social hierarchy (Blackledge & Creese, 2009; Iddings & McCaffery, 2007; Swain, 2002).

Bakhtin's observations of carnival strongly resonate with what I saw and heard in the children's experiences of animal-assisted literacy learning as explored in this dissertation. Specifically, four aspects of carnival are considered in my research: (1) carnival as an "escape from the usual official way of life" (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 8); (2) carnival implying a "playful, familiar relation to the world" (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 380) characterized by a suspension of social hierarchy, laughter, playfulness, and a temporary right to folly; (3) carnival as "free and familiar contact among people" (and in fact animals) allowing for a "new mode of interrelationship between individuals" (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 123); and finally, (4) the duality of carnival as a regenerative and transformative influence characterized by grotesque realism. Bakhtin's ideas about carnival serve to illuminate the meaning and significance of animal-assisted literacy learning for the children in my study specifically, and in considering the classroom literacy-learning context generally.

To achieve a deeper understanding of the dynamics undergirding animal-assisted literacy learning, this research was designed as a case study in one grade

2 classroom. It examined the experiences and potential significance of small-group in-class literacy learning opportunities with a therapy dog for the participating children. Vygotsky's (1978; 1986) sociocultural theory and Bakhtin's (1984a, 1984b) theory of carnival (discussed in more depth in Chapter 5) provided the lens for analysis in this study with a final aim of gaining a more sophisticated understanding of how interaction with a therapy dog and literacy mentor shapes how students think about and experience literacy in the classroom.

Research Methodology

An interpretive case study is well suited for studying this educational innovation because case studies seek a level of analysis which provides insights that affect and improve practice (Merriam, 1998). During a three-month period, I visited the classroom for two mornings each week with my two trained therapy dogs, both non-shedding Maltese-poodles. Each week, the students were invited to sign up for 20 minute individual or paired reading sessions with myself and the therapy dog of their choice in a divided section of the classroom during regular language arts class periods. During these sessions, my role was that of a researcher and literacy mentor, attending carefully to the quality of the relationship between the child, the dog, and myself, as well as nurturing emerging literacy skills (Ellis, Small-McGinley, & De Fabrizio, 2001).

Although animal-assisted programs have been incorporated into programs for individuals across the lifespan, Nimer and Lundahl indicate in their 2007 meta-analysis that young children (defined as 12 years and younger) "consistently

benefitted across all outcome variables… [while] other age groups were less consistent in the degree to which they benefitted from AAT" (p. 234). The authors note that "while the reasons for these patterns are not known, it may be that young children are more accepting of an animal's influence" (Nimer & Lundahl 2007, p. 234). Therefore, a class of grade 2 children was an appropriate choice for participation in this study.

Data for this study were collected through video and audio-taping of the literacy sessions: audio-taped interviews at three times during the study with selected students and the teacher, and with twelve of the students' parents towards the end of the study; a 'dog-blog' with the children; and the collection of relevant student literacy artifacts (i.e. student-generated writing or letters to the dog). To achieve triangulation of data, a 'critical friend' (Costa & Kallick, 1993), a PhD colleague, periodically reviewed and provided feedback on video-taped data to assist me in becoming more sharply self-evaluative (Perkins, 1991). Towards the end of the study, data were analyzed to identify themes and patterns (Creswell, 2008) to gain an understanding of how the participants experienced animal-assisted literacy mentoring sessions, and of the potential significance of these experiences for this class of grade 2 literacy learners.

The Paper Format

This dissertation is organized as a Mixed Format Thesis, which is defined as "a blending of published and as-yet un-published research" (University of Alberta, Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, 2009, p. 2). Typically, the

Mixed Format Thesis consists of an introductory chapter with subsequent chapters presented as individual papers, each with its own bibliography, followed by a concluding chapter. I have selected the paper format for my dissertation because in so doing, my work becomes accessible to a larger audience of educators (Duke & Beck, 1999; Grant & Reed, 2006), and because attending to reviewers' comments, as well as to the feedback received from my committee members, likely improved the quality of my work and further challenged my thinking (Grant & Reed, 2006).

Originating in Germany, the purpose of the traditional dissertation has historically been to assist novice researchers to acquire required knowledge with regard to scientific method, and has served as a way to 'train' doctoral students as well as to ensure that new scholars make 'original and significant' knowledge contributions (Berelson, 1960; Duke & Beck, 1999). Writing the dissertation as a series of journal articles allows the student to write "for a wider audience of professionals in the field, the same audience for whom he or she would be expected to write throughout his or her career" (Duke & Beck, 1999, p. 34). As Kamler (2008) notes, "if students publish in their formative years, they are more likely to do so as established academics or informed professionals in their chosen careers" (p. 292).

Despite the obvious benefits of paper format dissertations, they are not without their drawbacks. As noted by Grant and Reed (2006), there are few models of paper format dissertations, particularly in the social sciences. As emphasized by Grant and Reed (2006), paper dissertations demand inherent risks

of increased time and work requirements due to the publishing "revise and resubmit" cycle. Finally, because journal articles "are stand-alone manuscripts, whereas individual chapters in the traditional dissertation rest in the context of the whole" (Adams, 2008, p. 28), repetition in paper dissertations is common and inevitable, and can be distracting for the reader. As emphasized by Adams (2008), the paper dissertation "necessitates *abundant repetition* as...the scene [is set] anew for each article" (Conrad, 2004, p. 8, emphasis in the original).

While carefully examining the possibilities for a paper format dissertation, foundationally I know that "getting work out there in the public domain has clear benefits for the thesis in providing a usable, public critique" (Kamler, 2008, p. 291). The ongoing submission and publication of my work throughout my doctoral program has allowed for an expansion and refining of my thinking. Although it was challenging at times, I am reminded of how Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) write about the inherent difficulty involved in stretching the intellectual muscles. Much like a physical work-out, writing for peer-review is at times uncomfortable and difficult to endure, but it is always rewarding when viewed from the other side of the experience: how I feel post work-out or post-publication.

Organization of the papers

The manuscripts selected for inclusion in this dissertation are aligned with my overarching area of study while simultaneously attending to unique aspects of the research question. As noted by Adams (2008) "the paper dissertation allows

multiple approaches to an overarching research question, rather than the traditional investment in a single methodology. Researching and writing a cohesive set of papers addressing a single topic encourages multiple perspectives" (p. 28) on a single topic.

This dissertation is comprised of three manuscripts that have recently been published in peer-reviewed education journals, and one paper that has been revised as an invited edited book chapter. Also included in this dissertation is a short introductory piece (included in the first chapter), which has been previously published in a professional journal. Interestingly, of all of the published writing selected for inclusion in this dissertation, the professional journal article is the piece that has inspired the most emails and inquiries into my work, and has opened the door to media interest in my research[2]. As noted by Duke and Beck (1999), including writing intended for different audiences in the dissertation "offers important preparation for the nature of the field of education, in which we are expected to be able to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences (and are often, as a field, criticized for failing to do so)" (p. 34). Featuring these selected manuscripts in my dissertation serves to highlight key points in my thinking and in my development as a researcher as I have engaged in what Grant and Reed (2006) refer to as the "revise and resubmit" cycle of the peer-reviewed publishing world.

In addition to a common overarching commitment to my research topic, the papers are connected by a deep respect for process in qualitative methodology.

[2] Please see the appendix for copies of the press releases associated with this research.

Paralleling the emergent nature of qualitative research, each piece, while at times "[drawing] me along several but fertile tracks" (Adams, 2008, p. 29), served to inform and focus my attention towards a deeper understanding of how I might explore answers to my research questions. For example, although playing a more peripheral role over time in the development of my study, an early emphasis on, and exploration of, Thomas Guthrie's work allowed me to consider the research surrounding animal-assisted programs with children in relation to current literacy theory and practice. Viewing my work through different theoretical lenses such as Guthrie's over the course of my doctoral program has contributed to my growth as a scholar and to the thoughtful and conscious design of my research study[3]. The emergent nature of my understanding of the pieces involved in my research puzzle is reflected in the pausing and shifting of focus in my writing over time. Time is an important aspect of doctoral work, as it took time for me to even see the pieces involved (for example, it was quite late in my program when I began to consider how animal-assisted literacy programs might be informed by mentoring research), and to understand how these pieces might exist in relation to each other as my work continues to evolve. Although a paper format dissertation is in some ways static in that it captures pieces of published and prospective published writing at specific points in time, this format allows for a more realistic representation of my growth and understanding around my research topic than would a traditional dissertation format.

[3] Although not included in this dissertation, other theories I strongly considered for framing my study included Nel Noddings' (1984) ethic of care and Lave and Wenger's (1991) concepts of legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice. Brian Cambourne's (1988) conditions for literacy learning have also shaped my work over time.

Overview of the papers

PAPER 1*:* "Exploring animal-assisted programs with children in school and therapeutic contexts" was recently published in the *Early Childhood Education Journal*, and was the fourth-most popular downloaded article for this journal in 2010. This paper provides a foundational and over-arching review of the literature around the supporting research and common concerns and criticisms of animal-assisted programs with children, and explores the distinguishing features and underlying assumptions associated with these programs. In line with Duke and Beck's (1999) suggestion for a dissertation to include "one article for a journal in the candidate's narrow field of study and another for a journal in the candidate's broader field of study" (p. 34), I have chosen to include this paper first in the series because it informs the reader of the broader area of study (animal-assisted programs with children in school and therapeutic contexts) before focusing in on animal-assisted literacy programs specifically. In this paper I ask: What is the supporting research and concerns/criticisms of animal-assisted programs with children in these settings? What are the distinguishing features and underlying assumptions around animal-assisted programs with children? Several key aspects of this paper served to inform and refine my thinking: First, in this article I clarify the important requirement that the animals and the animal handlers involved in animal-assisted programs are rigorously screened and trained to be participants in these programs; this information directly informed my study as I prepared to become qualified for participation in a literacy program with my dogs in the school/classroom setting. Secondly, despite the popularity of programs

involving children and animals in schools and in therapeutic environments, along with an underlying assumption that children perceive the dogs as non-judgmental participants, in this work I uncovered a paucity of research exploring how children actually experience these programs. Further, what little research did exist focused exclusively on children in special-needs settings (which I would later recognize necessitates a remedial rather than a preventative approach to teaching and learning). Finally, in this paper I argue against the commonly used term of "animal-assisted therapy" or "animal-assisted activities" in the classroom context, and suggest that the more appropriate term for the work I am doing in classroom-based programs might be "animal-assisted learning."

PAPER 2 - "Potential for the role of school-based animal-assisted literacy mentoring programs" has been recently published in *Language & Literacy: A Canadian Educational E-Journal*. This article bridges the research on school-based animal-assisted literacy programs with research on school-based mentorship programs to explore the following questions: How might mentorship research inform the role of the adult as mentor in animal-assisted literacy programs? In what ways might interactions with a caring adult and a gentle, trained animal uniquely support children socially, emotionally, and academically? What may be the significance of animal-assisted literacy mentorship for children in the school context? In a focused analysis of the goals and guiding principles of school based mentorship programs and school-based animal-assisted literacy programs, I suggest possibilities for opening up the definition of literacy in animal-assisted programs to include the six language arts (as opposed to a

traditional focus exclusively on reading in these programs). Finally, I examine possibilities for how animal-assisted mentorship might uniquely support children's learning and over-all well-being with an emphasis on prevention of reading difficulties rather than remediation of them. I discuss the struggles facing schools that are required to provide for children's academic, emotional, and social needs when they are challenged by financial cutbacks. Coupled with accountability and the impact of the current economic crisis on today's families, I would suggest that schools can be potentially stressful places for children. Finally, I suggest that animal-assisted literacy mentoring experiences may offer multi-sensory learning opportunities and nurture children's imaginations as they work with text in the classroom context.

PAPER 3 - "Overview of the study's research method and data analysis" has been revised as an invited peer-reviewed book chapter for the Springer book series, *Educating the Young Child: Advances in Theory and Research, Implications for Practice*, in the volume titled *Learning to Care: Humane Education in Early Childhood.*[4] This chapter was originally presented as a paper for the Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada (LLRC) at the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE) Conference in Ottawa, 2009. This paper provides an overview of the study's design and offers background information about the study context and its participants. In particular, I focus on considerations for thoughtful entry and sustained involvement in an elementary language arts context when live animals are involved. Discussion of data

[4] The revised title for the book chapter will be "Guidelines for thoughtful entry and sustained involvement in animal-assisted literacy mentoring programs in elementary classrooms."

collection procedures and a detailed description of data analysis are included in this chapter.

PAPER 4 - "Animal-assisted literacy learning as carnival: A Bakhtinian analysis" has been published in the *International Journal of Learning*. When I read Bakhtin's theory of carnival I felt as though he knew the children in my study intimately, and I was finally able to shine some light on what the students had been trying to tell me all along. I was first introduced to the concept of carnival through Timothy Lensmire's 1997 article, published in the *Harvard Educational Review* and titled *Writer's workshop as carnival: Reflections on an alternative learning environment*. I was introduced to this article during the data collection phase of my study, when I was auditing a course focused on learning the art of academic writing. From the moment I began reading, I knew I was onto something special: I felt my thinking illuminate with every word. I remember how I rapidly began writing notes, making connections to my own work in the margins, laughing out loud and agreeing, noting similarities and subtle emerging frictions. I then went on to read Bakhtin's writing on carnival (1984a; 1984b) and the work of other literacy scholars who have incorporated Bakhtin's concept of carnival in their own work (see for example Blackledge & Creese, 2009; DaSilva Iddings, & McCafferty, 2007; Heilker, 2001; Swaim, 2002; Toohey, Waterstone, & Lemke, 2000). Viewing my data through the theoretical lens of Bakhtin's carnival, while remaining in conversation with the literature around animal-assisted literacy programs and school-based mentorship research, allowed for a thorough and systematic analysis of my coded data and assisted me in coming to

"link conceptual elements - the categories - together in some meaningful way" (Merriam, 2009, p. 189).

This paper examines the data from my study through the lens of Bakhtin's (1984a, 1984b) theory of carnival. Specifically, I consider four aspects of Bakhtin's theory: carnival as an "escape from the usual official way of life" (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 8); carnival as a "playful, familiar relation to the world" (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 380) characterized by a suspension of social hierarchy, laughter, playfulness, and a temporary right to folly; carnival as "free and familiar contact among people" (and in fact animals) that allows for a "new mode of interrelationship between individuals (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 123); and finally, carnival as potentially transformative experiences in children's broader school and at-home literacy lives. Viewing this case study through the lens of Bakhtin's theory allows for fascinating possibilities to be explored with regard to understanding how the children experienced this program and what the significance of these experiences were for them. In addition to incorporating the insights of other scholars who have worked with Bakhtin's theory of carnival in education-based research, this article includes a brief overview of related literature around animal-assisted and mentorship programs with children, and highlights key aspects of method.

CHAPTER 6 - "Discussion and implications for future research." The final chapter of this dissertation focuses on reflecting back and looking ahead in considering the insights I gained from this study alongside contemporary research focused on animal-assisted programs and school-based mentorship, and examines

the study findings alongside Brodkin and Coleman's (1986) definition of mentorship. Finally, this chapter outlines implications and possibilities for future research.

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CHAPTER 2:

Exploring Animal-Assisted Programs with Children and Dogs in School and Therapeutic Contexts[5]

Tango, the little white therapy dog, wags her tail in greeting on the school patio as two five-year old students prepare to engage in this afternoon's activities with their speech therapist. Today, the concrete is strewn with a series of colourful shapes with word cards of minimal pairs placed on top of each (e.g., 'sat' and 'cat'). The children concentrate on saying each of the words correctly, and then get to lift up each colourful shape to see if a paper bone is hidden underneath. In what seems to be a happy trot, Tango follows the students along the trail and sits in anticipation as the children focus on their words. If they find a bone, the children ask the dog to sit (they are working on the initial consonant s) to give her a treat. The students squeal with delight as they give Tango her reward, and they then run to the next shape, seemingly eager to demonstrate to Tango how well they are able to pronounce their words. Their conversation and efforts are punctuated by persistent efforts to maintain Tango's attention: "Look Tango, this is the letter s. It says ssss. See Tango?! We got that one right!" The teacher marvels at how focused and attentive the children are as they complete this task. When one of the children is asked what they like about having Tango participating in their lessons, she looks at the adult incredulously and asks: "Don't you know?! She's a really good listener!"

Anecdotes such as these are becoming increasingly common in educational and therapeutic environments as innovative programs are developed to assist children in their learning in increasingly varied and creative ways. But does the research support what seems to be largely anecdotal evidence of how therapy dogs may uniquely support children's learning and development? The purpose of this paper is to explore the literature and discuss the benefits, concerns, and criticisms of AAT with children, and to examine the distinguishing features and underlying assumptions of these programs with children in school and therapeutic contexts. Much of what we know today about the benefits for children

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when they interact with dogs began with the early work of child psychologist Boris Levinson, who is often referred to in the literature as the pioneer of AAT with children. In the late 1960's and 1970's, Levinson began to incorporate his dog into his therapy sessions. Levinson (1969) found that the dog acted as a 'social lubricant' between the therapist and child, which allowed for a more relaxed environment conducive to self-disclosure. Over the last thirty years, the unique form of support that dogs, in particular, seem to offer to children has been studied in the home (Lookabaugh Triebenbacher, 1998), in therapeutic settings (Levinson, 1971; Mallon, 1994), in classrooms and hospitals (Jalongo, 2005; Jalongo, Astorino, & Bomboy, 2004), and in special-needs environments (Anderson & Olson, 2006; Esteves & Stokes, 2008).

Research that examines children's interactions with dogs has demonstrated marked benefits for children physiologically (Odendaal, 2000), emotionally and socially (Anderson & Olson, 2006; Esteves & Stokes, 2008), and physically (Gee, Harris, & Johnson, 2007). Physiologically, the presence of a dog has been found to significantly lower signs of behavioural, emotional, and verbal distress in children when participating in a mildly stressful activity such as a visit to the doctor's office (Nagengast, Baun, Megel, & Leibowitz, 1997), and lower blood pressure and heart rate when a child reads aloud (Friedmann, Katcher, Thomas, Lynch, & Messent, 1983). Interacting with dogs has been found to contribute to elementary students' overall emotional stability and to more positive attitudes towards school in children diagnosed with severe emotional disorders (Anderson & Olson, 2006), and contribute to student self-esteem by providing a 'friend' to

bond with and love in the classroom setting (Zasloff & Hart, 1999). Further, students tend to be more attentive, more responsive, and more cooperative with an adult when a dog is present in the classroom (Limond, Bradshaw, & Cormack, 1997). In therapeutic settings, children have demonstrated increased alertness and attention span, and an enhanced openness and desire for social contact when involved in therapy sessions with dogs (Prothmann, Bienert, & Ettrich, 2006). Other benefits associated with children's interactions with therapy dogs include the acceptance and non-judgemental bond offered by these animals (Mallon, 1994) and the unique position of 'child as nurturer' in this relationship (Melson, 2001). In 2003, Barker, Rogers, Turner, Karpf, and Suthers-Mccabe published a bibliography of 84 refereed articles which focus on the benefits of interacting with companion animals for various populations, including children, adolescents, and the elderly. Since that time, the increase in carefully designed studies which explore the benefits for children in therapeutic environments and in classrooms suggests that research into the human-animal bond is a burgeoning and multi-disciplinary field of study worthy of attention (Jalongo 2005; Jalongo, Astorino, & Bomboy, 2004).

Common Concerns and Criticisms of AAT with Children

Special considerations are necessary to ensure the safety and well-being of everyone involved in programs with children and dogs. A number of authors have suggested that concerns about cleanliness and allergies are some of the primary deterrents for AAT programs (see for example Brodie, Biley, & Shewring, 2002; Johnson, Odendaal, & Meadows, 2002). However, in an article exploring the

potential risks associated with using pet therapy in healthcare settings in the Journal of Clinical Nursing, it was determined that "only 6% of people seen by allergists in North America have an allergic reaction as a result of animal dander" (Elliot, Tolle, Goldberg, & Miller, 1985). The authors conclude that "the incidence of pet-induced allergies can be reduced [by]… choosing the correct pet and by careful and regular grooming" (Brodie, Biley, & Shewring, 2002, p. 454). To minimize potential problems with allergies, it is important to select a dog that does not shed hair. The dog should also be bathed and groomed regularly before classroom visits and therapy sessions. To protect both the children and the dog, pre and post hand washing with a hand sanitizer is desirable. In addition, regular washing of any pillows or blankets used during the sessions, or if possible, holding the sessions outdoors, will help to reduce potential dander transfer. Finally, pre-arranging that the dog and handler arrive and leave through a designated entrance after classes have begun will decrease potential contact with children who do have allergies.

Another common concern of AAT programs involves safety for the children. As noted by Jalongo (2008), dog bites are common among young children but can be prevented with age-appropriate lessons focused on helping children to become empathetic towards a dog's unique needs. Learning to interact with a dog in a quiet and gentle manner, when and how it is appropriate to approach a dog, learning how to play fair, and how the child should act if he or she is afraid of the dog (Jalongo, 2006; Jalongo, 2008) are all important lessons for children to learn prior to introducing a dog into the school or therapeutic

context. In their meta-analysis of animal-assisted therapy, Johnson, Odendaal, and Meadows (2002) recommend that administrative and staff concerns regarding safety and allergies need to be addressed early on, so an on-site meeting should be arranged to establish agreed-upon procedures prior to the beginning of a program.

In some cultures, (i.e. Middle Eastern or South-east Asian) dogs are perceived to be 'unclean' and therefore interaction between children and these animals is strongly dissuaded (Jalongo, Astorino & Bomboy, 2004). It is important to note that in any AAT program, informed consent needs to be given by both the child and his or her parents prior to any interaction between the child and the dog. In some cases, families may become more accepting of interaction with a dog when they are provided with opportunities to see for themselves how well-groomed and obedient the animal is and how closely the interaction would be monitored by a responsible adult. When parents still have objections to interaction with a dog, it is important to respect their wishes. Further, it is essential that clear procedures, professional training (of both the dog and the handler), and the type of interaction that will be taking place are established and respectfully communicated to parents before the beginning of the program so that parents are well-informed before deciding whether or not to involve their child. Families who choose for the child not to participate should be able to do so without prejudice.

Finally, other concerns regarding AAT with children include considerations for the dogs themselves. To ensure the health and comfort of animals when participating in AAT programs, water and a dog kennel should be

provided for the animal at all times, and regular exercise breaks are required. The dog needs to be closely monitored for signs of stress, including shaking, ears back or tail between the legs, or persistent licking. Treats, if allowed by the handler, should only be given to the dog under the direct supervision of the handler, and under no circumstances should an animal be left unsupervised when interacting with a child. Finally, it is desirable if the dog and handler are provided with opportunities to visit the AAT site prior to beginning the program so that the dog can become familiar with the environment.

Distinguishing Features and General Assumptions of AAT with Children and Dogs

In 2009 I attended the annual SPCA sponsored Humane Education Conference at Green Chimneys Farm in Brewster, New York, where I conversed with scholars from 12 countries working with children in AAT programs in various contexts. The conference, titled *Experiential Learning in Humane Education,* "brought together educators, animal welfare professionals and others interested in the human-animal bond" (http://www.greenchimneys.org/). Green Chimneys is an internationally renowned and state-funded boarding school established by the Ross family in 1947, and it has been recognized for its innovative programs in AAT with children. The school "enables youngsters to reconnect and re-establish bonds with living things in their care, helping to restore their ability to smile, care and succeed" (Green Chimneys Board Presentation, May 5, 2007). I found it to be a unique and empowering experience to be in the company of so many individuals who had gathered to explore possibilities for

children's learning from and with animals. However, as is reflected in current literature, it became clear that AAT is a relatively new field of study and requires further attention with regard to the defining characteristics of this approach to teaching and learning. In August of 2009, the National Institutes of Health (N.I.H.) in the U.S.A. announced their first sponsorship of research to explore the benefits of child-animal interaction. Although the results of these studies will not be available for at least two more years, N.I.H. funding will provide researchers with an opportunity to build an empirical research basis and understand the potentially unique benefits of animal-assisted programs for children's learning and well-being.

To better understand how AAT might contribute to children's learning and development, it is necessary to explore the distinguishing features and general assumptions of existing programs in AAT with children and therapy dogs in special-needs classrooms and in therapeutic environments. My exploration is somewhat confined to special-needs classrooms because there has been scant research which explores AAT in the regular classroom. As will be discussed in this section of the article, although the term *therapy* dog may not accurately describe the service that these dogs provide, the general assumption underlying AAT seems to be that it is the children's perception of the dog as a non-judgemental participant which may offer children unique and valuable forms of social and emotional support in the therapeutic and special-needs classroom context.

Distinguishing features of AAT with children

In their 2007 quantitative meta-analysis, Nimer and Lundahl define AAT as "the deliberate inclusion of an animal in a treatment plan" where "the introduction of the animal is designed to accomplish predefined outcomes believed to be difficult to achieve otherwise or outcomes best addressed through exposure to an animal" (p. 225). In AAT, the therapy dog and its handler (the dog's owner) work alongside teachers and therapists to help children achieve an educational objective (e.g. pronunciation of the initial consonant *s*) or a therapeutic goal (e.g. increased positive communication with others). In contrast, Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA):

> …provide opportunities for motivational, educational, recreational, and/or therapeutic benefits to enhance the quality of life. AAA's are delivered in a variety of environments by specially trained professionals, paraprofessionals, and/or volunteers in association with animals that meet specific criteria. Key features include absence of specific treatment goals; volunteers and treatment providers are not required to take detailed notes, and visit content is spontaneous. (Delta Society n.d. as cited in Granger & Kogan 2006, p. 264)

Although these definitions, in theory, help to distinguish the difference between AAT and AAA, they are not adhered to consistently in the literature. Granger and Kogan (2006) note that, "the term "pet therapy" is used commonly to convey forms of human-animal interaction, without differentiating between animal-assisted therapy and activity" (p. 264). In the context of this paper, I refer to AAT in therapeutic environments, including therapy clinics where children receive one-on-one therapy sessions with a therapist (Levinson, 1969; Prothmann, Bienert, & Ettrich, 2006); in residential treatment centres for children (Mallon 1994); and in

special-needs environments, including classrooms designed to meet the special needs of children within the regular school setting (Esteves & Stokes, 2008; Gee, Harris, & Johnson 2007) and school settings designed specifically for children with severe learning difficulties (Limond, Bradshaw, & Cormack, 1997).

Nimer and Lundahl (2007) clarify that AAT is a supplemental intervention treatment that has been used in various settings, including hospitals, therapy clinics, libraries, and special-needs classrooms. The word 'therapy' is defined in the Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary (2007) as the “treatment of bodily, mental, or behavioural disorder(s)” (p. 1296); the term 'therapy dog' may imply that these animals have the ability to treat children’s emotional, behavioural, or physical difficulties and therefore may not appropriately describe the work that such dogs do in the context of AAT. However, in the absence of a more appropriate term, for my purposes here, the term therapy dog is used.

In AAT settings, the dog is always accompanied by its owner. Due to the specific nature of AAT intervention, the role the owner/handler plays depends on the nature of the intervention and is therefore difficult to define. Generally, the therapist or special education teacher working with the child selects AAT as an intervention supplement when, based on a thorough understanding of a child’s unique needs, he or she deems that AAT intervention would be appropriate in assisting the child to meet intervention goals. For example, as was illustrated in the anecdote beginning this article, the children involved had expressed an interest in animals previously, so it was determined that an animal-assisted program may be an appropriate choice to supplement their learning. Other programs, such as

those designed to provide opportunities for children to read with and to a therapy dog with the ongoing support and assistance of the adult handler, may inspire children who were previously reluctant to read to engage in oral reading tasks when invited to read to a 'non-judgemental' audience (Friesen, 2009a; Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2008; Jalongo, 2005).

General assumptions of AAT with children

Upon closer examination of Nimer and Lundahl's definition of AAT, the underlying assumption of AAT is that therapy dogs provide "a unique form of support to children's learning, physical health, and emotional well-being" (Jalongo, Astorino, & Bomboy, 2004, p. 10). By a 'unique form of support,' I mean that by incorporating a dog into the setting, interaction between a child and adult may become possible when human attempts alone prove insufficient. This kind of support is evident in Canadian child-psychologist Boris Levinson's seminal work, *Pet-Oriented Child Psychotherapy* (1969). As previously discussed, Levinson observed that interaction between a therapist and child became possible through the dog's acceptance of the child, particularly when the child was otherwise unresponsive to extensive therapy. Ultimately, Levinson concluded that incorporating the dog into sessions with children can facilitate the development of the child-therapist relationship. The implications regarding how a therapy dog may influence the child-teacher relationship or relationships amongst peers in the typical classroom is an exciting and promising area of future research in AAT (Esteves & Stokes, 2008).

Although much of the early research exploring AAT was not taken seriously by academic disciplines outside of veterinary medicine (Hines, 2003), research in AAT has gained scientific support in recent years through an increase in controlled studies. The conclusion of researchers, regardless of methodological approach, suggests that dogs can have a positive influence on children's well-being (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007). AAT supporters suggest that it is specifically the non-human quality of therapy dogs' inability to "form an opinion by discerning and comparing" (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2007, p. 677), in other words, their perceived non-judgemental nature, which makes therapy dogs a desirable and unique supplement to intervention programs with children. This perception of therapy dogs as non-judgemental is often cited as support for their inclusion in treatment programs in therapeutic (Levinson, 1969; Mallon, 1994) and special-needs environments (Gee, Harris, & Johnson, 2007; Limond, Bradshaw, & Cormack, 1997; Prothmann, Bienert, & Ettrich, 2006). For example, a study by Gee, Harris, and Johnson (2007) examined how therapy dogs might affect the speed and accuracy of motor skills tasks in 14 children aged four to six years. In this study, the children were asked to perform 10 motor skill tasks such as long jump, high jump, throwing, and balancing on a balance beam. "In the dog-present conditions, the dog either performed the task immediately prior to, or at the same time as, the child" (p. 377). Using a two-way mixed model analysis of variance, the researchers determined that the children "performed faster, but without compromising accuracy, in all tasks but one" when the dog modelled the activity compared to when the dog was absent (p. 375). As perceived by the researchers,

the inclusion of the therapy dog may have helped to lower stress in the children because of their "reduced fear of criticism from a non-judgmental source" (p. 382). Upon closer examination of this claim, the underlying assumption is that there was a perceived form of negative judgement about the child by the teacher prior to introducing the therapy dog. This perception of the teacher is a consideration worth examining; regardless of a teacher's best intentions to be supportive and non-judgemental, one common factor in environments in which AAT has been used is the unequal power relationship between therapist or teacher and child. In the end, it is an educator's role to make informed judgements about how well a child is able to master objectives, and it is the therapist's responsibility to determine how well his or her client has met their goals. However, the power balance seems to shift by incorporating the 'non-judgemental' therapy dog as well as what may be perceived by the child as a neutral or 'highly likable' adult into the intervention (Geries-Johnson & Kennedy, 1995; Wells & Perrine, 2001). The assumption in AAT is that although therapy dogs and their handlers are present and interactive, they are perceived by children to be outside of the complications and expectations of relationships commonly experienced at school or in therapeutic settings.

AAT research suggests that interacting with dogs can help to encourage children's social interaction with peers and adults in special needs classrooms because of therapy dogs' perceived non-judgmental nature. In the literature, it seems that interaction in AAT settings is encouraged in one of three ways: the dog may offer a unique form of unconditional social support for children with severe

emotional disorders through acting as the child's 'friend' as perceived by the child (Anderson & Olson, 2006); the dog's spontaneous enthusiasm for social interaction may provide the stimulus for the child's own social behaviour (Prothmann, Bienert, & Ettrich, 2006); or the dog may increase positive initiated interactions toward the teacher both while interacting with the dog (Esteves & Stokes, 2008; Limond, Bradshaw, & Cormack, 1997) and when in the classroom following interaction with the dog (Esteves & Stokes, 2008). As was noted by Anderson and Olsen (2006), the "integration of the dog…provided each [child] with lessons in respect, responsibility, and empathy" (p. 47). To encourage positive social interaction amongst students and between students and their teacher, Esteves and Stokes (2008) suggest that:

> Dogs can also be used as an assistant in the classroom in teaching a specific task such as daily living skills, or as part of a curriculum such as reading, writing, story time, circle time, etc. A dog can act as the subject for creative writing, for reading stories about dogs, or can participate with children in group activities, with the dog being counted as a member of the group. This may increase participation for the children in some activities. It may not be beneficial to have the dog present throughout the school day, however, as this would be exhausting for the dog and disruptive for the children. (p. 14)

This research indicates that children's interaction with therapy dogs may support and encourage social risk-taking in the school setting, particularly for children who are otherwise either unwilling or reluctant to engage socially.

Although therapy dogs may help to increase socialization in classroom and therapeutic environments because of their interactive nature, therapy dogs are also thought to have a profound calming effect on children perceived to be under stress (Mallon 1994; Prothmann, Bienert, & Ettrich, 2006). In fact, it seems to be

precisely because children feel less anxiety when interacting with therapy dogs that they are willing to engage with peers and adults. Studies exploring the physiological effects of the presence of an animal suggest that interacting with a dog may significantly reduce verbal, behavioural, and emotional anxiety in children. Specifically, AAT may lower blood pressure and heart rate when a child reads aloud[6] (Friedmann, Katcher, Thomas, Lynch, & Messent, 1983) and when a child participates in a mildly stressful activity such as a visit to the doctor's office (Nagengast, Baun, Megel, & Leibowitz, 1997). Because AAT intervention usually takes place in therapeutic, medical, and classroom environments, it seems likely that when children may experience stress, calming interaction with the dog may help to alleviate some of these anxieties.

Concluding Remarks

In summary, the distinguishing features of AAT with children in therapeutic environments are characterized by their incorporation into treatment plans as a supplement to an intervention goal, and in special-needs environments as a supplement to an educational objective. Particularly because therapy dogs often work in public environments, they require extensive obedience and temperance training and are always accompanied by their handler or by the handler/therapist. Potential candidates for AAT are identified by the special

[6] Friedmann et al.'s (1983) study examined the influence of a dog on children's blood pressure (BP) and heart rate (HR) and involved 36 children aged 9 to 16 years. In this study, each child rested comfortably for 2 minutes before reading for 2 minutes from a book of children's poetry. "In one condition a friendly dog was present in the room and in the other it was not" (p. 462). The children had not met the dog prior to the experiment. The researchers determined that the dog's presence "was associated with lower BP and HR" (p. 464) while the children read. Further, the authors "speculate that the presence of a pet modifies the subject's perception of the experimenter and the environment by making both less threatening and more friendly, which leads to a decrease in resting BP and in the BP response to verbalization" (p. 464).

education teacher or by the therapist based on a clear understanding of a child's educational or therapeutic goals.

The general assumptions underlying AAT with children are that the children seem to perceive therapy dogs as a neutral or non-judgemental participant in the therapeutic or classroom environment. Although the word 'support' can indicate direct and verbal involvement when working with children, these animals may be able to offer children unique and valuable social and emotional support precisely because they are active and willing participants, but with the qualifier that it is outside the realm of their communicative abilities to verbally criticize or judge the child's progress (Friesen, 2009b). As Melson (2001) states, animals may offer children "…a time-out from the anxieties of human exchange… Despite most children's acknowledgement that [animals] cannot literally comprehend what they are saying, children have the feeling of being heard and being understood" (p. 51).

The nature of the interaction between children and dogs in school and therapeutic environments does not exclusively include treatment of maladjustment as the term 'therapy dog' implies. Instead, research exploring AAT with children indicates that therapy dogs act as a non-judgemental supplement to an intervention and seem to commonly offer benefits for children who are socially unresponsive, shy, or withdrawn and/or who may experience heightened anxiety. Therefore, perhaps a more accurate term for what is currently referred to as Animal-Assisted Therapy in school environments might be *Animal-Assisted Learning*, which may more fully "capture the essence of the relationship"

(Nagengast, Baun, Megel, & Leibowitz, 1997, p. 329) between children and these animals.

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CHAPTER 3:

Potential for the Role of School-Based Animal-Assisted Literacy Mentoring Programs[7]

Research exploring school-based literacy mentorship programs indicates that every child can benefit academically, socially, and emotionally from caring relationships with non-related adults (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2006; Ellis, Small-McGinley, & De Fabrizio, 2001). Although millions of children continue to read below grade level in North America (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; National Center for Education Statistics, 2009), contemporary literacy research suggests that regular opportunities to experience and enjoy literature helps to develop students' understanding of story structure, encourages vocabulary development, and comprehension (Pressley, 2001). An emerging body of research exploring animal-assisted literacy programs suggests that companion animals, and dogs in particular, are thought to provide a non-threatening yet socially supportive and interactive audience for children when practicing their oral reading skills. International and innovative programs have been developed which pair young readers with a well-behaved and gentle animal and an adult volunteer in schools and libraries. Although further research is required to explore what the significance of these programs may be for young learners, anecdotal evidence from educators and parents who have participated in Reading Education Assistance Dog (R.E.A.D.) programs suggest that the children's enthusiasm and confidence towards reading to the animals carries over into their classroom

[7] A version of this chapter has been published. *Friesen 2010. Language & Literacy, 12(1): 21-37.*

experience because the dogs are able to offer "a wonderful combination of kindness, curiosity, and patience to the task of reading" (Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2010). As indicated by promising pilot studies, the unconditional acceptance offered by a gentle animal seems to positively influence self-confidence and a child's willingness to read (Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2010).

The Intermountain Therapy Animals Association, in its organizational mission statement, emphasizes that the goal of their R.E.A.D. program is to "improve the literacy skills of children through the assistance of registered therapy teams as literacy mentors[8]" (2010). Current research examining school-based[9] mentorship programs involving children and non-related adults suggests that the term 'literacy mentor' indicates potential for the development of a meaningful relationship between the participating adult and the child. However, although organizers of most animal-assisted literacy programs would likely agree that children involved in these programs require the attentive support and assistance of an adult while reading with and to the dog, the relationship most commonly emphasized is the bond that the child will likely establish with the dog. Drawing on contemporary studies exploring school-based mentoring programs, this article examines how mentorship research can inform and inspire possibilities

[8] The term *therapy dog,* in the context of these programs, means that the dog is over one year of age, has completed basic obedience training and has been evaluated for having an appropriate temperament for working with children, has veterinary certification of excellent health and is vaccinated, is well-groomed, calm, and gentle (I.T.A., 2010).

[9] The term *school based* means that "the mentoring activities occurred in the school setting only during the academic year" (Randolph & Johnson, 2008, p. 178).

for child-adult relationship development within animal-assisted literacy programs, and suggests how animal-assisted mentoring may provide unique and valuable educational, emotional, and social support for children in the elementary language arts classroom context.

School-Based Mentorship Programs Defined

It is helpful to begin with a brief overview of the distinguishing features of school-based mentoring programs to highlight the similarities and differences between human-only programs and animal-assisted literacy programs. A compelling field of research exploring school-based mentoring programs suggests that providing children with regular opportunities to interact with a non-related adult role model can provide many positive benefits for students academically, socially, and/or emotionally (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2006; de Anda, 2001; Ellis, Hart, & Small-McGinley, 1998; Randolph & Johnson, 2008; Rhodes, 2002). School-based mentoring programs vary widely in the frequency of contact required between mentor and protégé as well as in the length of the program. However, Small-McGinley (2000) notes that the majority of school-based mentoring programs require a one-on-one relationship between the mentor and protégé, developed over time through regular weekly meetings. Although many mentoring programs can last for one to two years (Small-McGinley, 2000), research demonstrates that programs lasting for as short as three months with weekly one-hour meetings between mentor and protégé can offer significant academic and social/emotional benefits for children (Ellis, Small-McGinley, & De Fabrizio, 2001).

Within various programs the definition of mentorship reflects the range of intentions and the targeted population of each program. Some programs view the role of the mentor as tutor with a focus primarily on improving student academic performance. Others place the quality of the relationship between the mentor and protégé as their priority, while still others strive for a balance between supporting children academically and emotionally and/or socially (Small-McGinley, 2000). However, even in programs where a heavy emphasis is placed on the mentor tutoring the child, it is essential to remember that it is not the volunteer's role or responsibility to teach the child how to read. Rather, the mentor's role is to foster enjoyment in literacy through involving the child in gentle engagement activities, while thoughtfully attending to the development of a meaningful relationship between adult and child (Ellis, Small-McGinley, & De Fabrizio, 2001).

Brodkin and Coleman (1996) define mentorship with a dual focus on relationship as well as academics, as "one who provides one-to-one support and attention, is a friend and role model, boosts a child's self-esteem, enhances a student's educational experience" (p. 21). Although "all children need supportive interaction with caring adults to learn and grow" (Ellis, Small-McGinley, & De Fabrizio, 2001, p. 43), Randolph and Johnson (2008) highlight that the majority of mentoring programs available to youth are designed as selective programs for youth who are at a "slightly elevated risk status relative to their peers" (p. 179). This observation is supported by DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, and Cooper (2002), who emphasize that many mentoring programs are designed to pair non-

related[10] adult mentors with children who have been identified as being 'at risk' by their teachers (who may be struggling academically or socially), children who come from single-parent homes, or for children of varying ethnic minorities, while other mentoring programs are open to all children (Randolph & Johnson, 2008).

Animal-Assisted Literacy Mentorship Programs Defined

It is clear that a range of school-based mentoring programs exist, and there is a great deal of potential for children to benefit emotionally, socially, and academically through regular caring interaction with a non-related adult mentor in these diverse programs. Over the past ten years, a burgeoning field of research exploring human-animal interaction in psychology, counselling and special-needs education suggests that many benefits are associated with providing children with regular opportunities for supervised interaction with a calm, trained, and well-groomed animal, and with dogs in particular (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007). It is intriguing to explore the possibilities for how the inclusion of a dog in school-based mentoring programs involving children and non-related adult mentors might offer children unique educational, emotional, and social support in the school context.

The theoretical basis of animal-assisted programs rests on a concept which is becoming increasingly well-known as the human-animal bond. This concept

[10] It is not my intention to privilege 'non-related' adult mentors above 'related' mentors in a child's life. It is of course possible that one student's parent or relative could serve as an adult mentor to not only that child but to other students in the class/school who may or may not have positive 'natural' mentors in their lives.

was initially proposed by veterinarians (Hines, 2003) and later conceptualized by Edward O. Wilson, a Pulitzer Prize winner and science professor at Harvard University, in his landmark book *Biophilia* (Wilson, 1984) and later the *Biophilia Hypothesis* (Kellert & Wilson, 1993). Biophilia is defined by Wilson (1984) as an "innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes" (p. 1) due to humans' deep and complex connection with other organisms in the natural world. Wilson (1993) emphasizes that, as humans, our relationship with the natural world is historically and biologically based. In fact, he notes that:

> for more than 99% of human history people have lived in hunter-gatherer bands totally and intimately involved with other organisms. During this period of deep history, and still farther back, into paleohominid times, they depended on an exact learned knowledge of crucial aspects of natural history….In short, the brain evolved in a biocentric world, not a machine-regulated world. (Wilson, 1993, p. 32)

Wilson (1993) emphasizes that humans' relationship with nature elevates and enriches our own existence, and we are drawn to nature because we recognize ourselves within it. In support of the biophilia hypothesis, Kellert (1993) states that "the human need for nature is linked not just to the material exploitation of the environment but also to the influence of the natural world on our emotional, cognitive, aesthetic, and even spiritual development. . . [M]uch of the human search for a coherent and fulfilling existence is intimately dependent on our relationship to nature" (pp. 42-43).

In my work with children, time and again I have observed what seems to be a common fascination with nature. Whether it is bringing in worms from the playground at recess or becoming instantly attached to a stray kitten, children are often drawn to the natural world. A burgeoning field of research exploring the human-animal bond between children and animals suggests that dogs may be able to offer a unique form of support for children's learning and development in the school and classroom environment due to their non-judgemental yet highly social nature (Esteves & Stokes 2008; Friesen, 2009; Jalongo, Astorino & Bomboy, 2004; Limond, Bradshaw & Cormack, 1997).

Established in November, 1999, and based out of Utah, U.S.A., the largest known animal-assisted literacy organization is the Intermountain Therapy Animals Association (I.T.A.). The I.T.A. trains and supports more than 550 Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.) and their owners working as 'literacy mentor teams' in schools and libraries in 43 states in the U.S. and in British Columbia, Canada (R.E.A.D., 2007). A complete listing of R.E.A.D. affiliate programs is available on the website: http://www.therapyanimals.org/Find-Local-READ-Programs-and-Regional-Workshops.html. As an affiliate organization of the Delta Society, I.T.A. requires that the person on the end of the leash receive training as well as the animal. Numerous organizations that are not formally affiliated with the I.T.A. run similar programs, many of which are based on the I.T.A. model. However, programs designed to provide children with opportunities to read with and to dogs in schools and/or libraries are not strictly a North-American phenomenon. As is

illustrated Figure 1, there are a growing number of animal-assisted literacy organizations in countries such as Asia, Australia, and India.[11] The growing popularity of programs such as these demonstrates the varied positive roles that dogs are playing in human lives in countries around the world.

Similar to traditional school-based mentoring programs, school-based animal-assisted literacy programs vary widely in the frequency of contact between the child and literacy mentor team and in the length of the program, in addition to the population targeted within each program (R.E.A.D., 2007). While some programs are designed to focus on children who have been identified to be at-risk either socially or academically, others are open to any interested students. Some programs focus specifically on the needs of children in grades K-3 while others are open to children up to grade 6. Like many traditional mentoring programs, the focus in these programs is on academics, and on reading in particular. However, the relationship most commonly emphasized in animal-assisted reading programs is the developing bond between the child and the dog, with less attention placed on the potential relationship between the non-related adult and the child. Further, the power of animal-assisted literacy programs, at least in part, lies in the fact that the dogs "sit there and don't interrupt. They don't ask questions like people" (Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2010).

[11] Although this list is likely not exhaustive, it offers a sampling of the wide range of animal-assisted literacy programs currently running in schools and/or libraries in various countries.

Table 1. Listing of North American and Overseas Animal-Assisted Literacy Organizations

Programs that have self-identified as I.T.A. R.E.A.D. affiliates are marked with an asterisk (*).

Canada

Program Name	Location	Website
PAWS for a Story	Edmonton, AB	http://www.pettherapysociety.com/programs/paws-for-a-story/
Paws for Reading*	Vancouver, BC	http://www.nvsd44.bc.ca/SchoolSites/Westview/Programs/PAWS1.aspx
Paws to Read, Therapeutic Paws of Canada	Gibsons, BC, Halifax & Sydney, NS, Toronto, ON, Charlottetown, PEI, Montreal, QU	http://www.tpoc.ca/ChildrensPrograms.aspx
Tales to Tails	Kitchener-Waterloo, ON	http://www.hcws.org/tales_to_tails.html

United States

Program Name	Location	Website
BARK (Beach Animals Reading with Kids)	Southern California (numerous locations)	http://bark.web.officelive.com/currentlocations.aspx
Bideawee's Reading to Dogs	Long Island and Manhattan, NY	http://www.bideawee.org/programs_&_services/learning_centers/reading_to_dogs.php
Librarydogs.com*	Illinois, Iowa, Montana, Ohio,Texas, & Wisconsin	http://www.librarydogs.com/why_dogs.html
Love on a Leash: Paws to Read	Southern California (numerous locations)	http://www.loveonaleash.org/pages/what.html
Mo-Kan Pet Partners*	Kansas	http://www.mo-kanpetpartners.org/read.html
Pals with Paws*	Elk Rapids, MI	http://palspaws.com/readprogram.html
Partners Achieving Literacy (P.A.L.)	Huntsville, AL	http://www.therapypartners.org/our_programs/our_programs_pal.htm
Paws for Reading	Newark, DE	http://sites.google.com/site/pawsforpeople/paws-for-reading
Paws 4 Reading*	Louisiana	http://www.pawsnela.org/pet_therapy_paws4reading.htm

United States (Cont'd…)

Program Name	Location	Website
Paws to Read	Rifle, CO	http://www.riflelibraryfriends.org/pawstoread.html
Reading Paws*	Alabama, Florida, Georgia, &Tennessee	http://www.readingpaws.org/
Reading with Rover*	Washington, DC	http://www.readingwithrover.org/
Reading Pals with Paws	Southern California and Colorado	http://www.paw-pals.org/page/page/1408434.htm
Rocky Mountain R.E.A.D. Program*	Denver, CO	http://www.rockymountainread.org/
Sit Stay Read	Chicago, IL	http://www.sitstayread.org/
Story Tails*	Plainville, CT	http://www.tailsofjoy.org/pages/read.htm
Tail Waggin Tutors, Therapy Dogs International	Flanders, NJ	http://www.tdi-dog.org/OurPrograms.aspx?Page=Children+Reading+to+Dogs
Tales of Joy R.E.A.D. Program*	New Mexico	http://www.talesofjoyread.com/Home.html
Therapy Dogs Inc.	Cheyenne, WY	http://www.therapydogs.com/index.aspx

Overseas

Program Name	Location	Website
Newspaper in Education	Vidya Valley, Pashan, India	http://www.animalangels.org.in/aa/Times-NIE.htm
Pets for Therapy	Gold Coast, Australia	http://www.gallerygiselle.com/petcontact.htm
The Reading Lab, Assistance Dogs Australia	Sydney and Melbourne, Australia	http://www.assistancedogs.org.au/news.php?newsid=17
Professor Paws, Animals Asia Foundation	Hong Kong, China, Malaysia, Philippines, Japan, India, and Taiwan	http://www.animalsasia.org/index.php?UID=9LQ3T5ZA1386

Initial Development of the Child-Mentor Relationship

Mentorship research indicates that the child-mentor relationship would likely deepen and be strengthened over time if attention were focused on the development of a meaningful relationship between the child, the adult and the dog. However, many programs have cut back to once-a month sessions in libraries because initial interest seems to decrease over time. If the emphasis in animal-assisted literacy programs were on the development of a genuine, caring relationship between the adult, child, and dog, it seems less likely that the initial interest and novelty would wear off.

This emphasis on relationship development has intriguing implications for how the dog may be incorporated into mentoring experiences. Ellis, Small-McGinley, and De Fabrizio (2001) emphasize that from the beginning of a mentorship program, the mentor's sustained attention to establishing a nurturing, trusting relationship with the child is essential. Listening carefully to the child's interests and sharing stories about their own lives in return, and then incorporating the child's interests into literacy activities during mentoring sessions are all important aspects of establishing mentor-child rapport (Ellis et al., 2001). Drawing on what seems to be a common interest and fascination with many children, having the dog to focus on during these early interactions may positively influence otherwise awkward moments common in new relationships. Sharing humorous stories about the dog, for example, talking about the child's own pet(s) or other animals in their lives, or reading a popular children's book featuring a dog may serve as a comfortable and meaningful starting place for the mentor and

child to begin to get to know each other. Asking the child to bring an item that is important to him or her to the first session to share and talk about, with the mentor bringing the dog as his or her important gift to share may set the tone for a warm and positive atmosphere for learning.

One explanation for how an animal might influence early relationship dynamics between a child and a non-related adult comes from the early work of child psychologist Boris Levinson. In the late 1960's and 1970's, Levinson began to incorporate his dog into his therapy sessions. Levinson (1969) found that the dog acted as a 'social lubricant' between the therapist and child, which allowed for a more relaxed environment conducive to self-disclosure on the part of the child. Because "the mentoring relationship is the tool for change in mentoring programs" (Rhodes, 2002) it is significant to consider that the inclusion of the dog as a 'social lubricant' may act as a catalyst for the relationship between the adult and child. Levinson (1987) suggests that the act of petting an animal serves two functions for the child: it draws attention away from him or herself and onto the dog, and allows the child to feel accepted and trusted by the dog who is allowing itself to be touched. Other researchers suggest that it may be the calming presence of the dog which causes a profound change in atmosphere, characterized by warmth and acceptance (Prothmann, Bienert, & Ettrich, 2006) which in turn may encourage risk-taking, a necessary component of literacy learning for children (Cambourne, 1988).

Continued Development of the Child-Mentor Relationship

How a dog many influence relationship dynamics is not limited to the initial stages of the child-mentor relationship. Possibilities for how a dog might play an integral role in nurturing and deepening this unique adult-child relationship are illuminated when considered alongside Ellis, Small-McGinley, and De Fabrizio's (2001) four key aspects involved in the dynamics of mentorship relationships with children and nonrelated adults, adapted from Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern's (1990) model, *The Circle of Courage*.

1. A relationship is not a feeling, but results from action, and the action or process entails some form of giving.

Ellis, Small-McGinley, and De Fabrizio (2001) emphasize that "it is through two lives coming together in this intentional and focused way that giving can occur spontaneously and even in spite of intentionality, and relationships and attachments can grow" (p. 177). These authors emphasize that beyond the varied reciprocal giving that can occur between mentors and children (i.e., small gifts, praise, and genuine care), it was "their very presence, their aliveness, and all of their nuanced responses to the child's aliveness" (p. 177) that supported the growth of these relationships. The nuanced interaction that Ellis and colleagues (2001) refer to here may be complemented by the profound attention, affection, and acceptance offered through a dog's range of subtle responses: the wag of a tail in greeting, a kiss on a small hand, or a dog's uncanny ability to notice subtle

changes in mood, for example, which in turn may uniquely contribute to and/or reinforce attention and care between all participants.

2. If helping adults are liked and admired by young people, the young people will be more receptive to the adults' guidance, will seek their approval, and will be inclined to imitate their behaviours and attitudes.

Current research suggests that adults may seem more approachable and easier to talk to when they are accompanied by a dog. A recent study by Esteves and Stokes (2008) found that when school children were given opportunities to interact with a small dog as part of their daily lessons with their teacher, these interactions contributed to grade 2 students' positive communication with their teacher, both during these sessions and in the classroom following sessions with the dog. This study is significant because if a dog can positively influence a child's relationship with his or her teacher, then it is possible that a child's perception of and communication with his or her mentor may also be positively affected when the mentor is accompanied by a dog. Further, it is not difficult to envision how, as literacy mentors, our own close and loving relationship with our animals may serve as a positive model for the interaction possible between ourselves, the animal, and the child. As Fine and Eisen (2008) acknowledge, "my animals have taught me to be calm, gentle, and, ironically, more human with others" (p. 10). If a child's receptivity to guidance from a mentor stems from the establishment of a bond between the adult and child, then how might relationship and learning be shaped by the common bond the child and adult share with the animal, or by the unique bonds between group members (including the dog)?

3. Helping adults must be able to bring warmth and stability to their attachments.

Ellis, Small-McGinley, and De Fabrizio (2001) articulate that "much of the expression of warmth [in mentoring relationships] is nonverbal" (p. 180) and that "warmth itself may be a gift given, a way of interacting, or a state of being that resists definition" (p. 184). The nonverbal warmth Ellis and her colleagues refer to resonates with how children's interactions with dogs have been described in studies in therapeutic settings. Prothmann, Bienert, and Ettrich (2006) observe that dogs "seem to be able to be able to cause a profound change in the atmosphere...the children and adolescents may feel transported into an atmosphere that is characterized by warmth, acceptance, and empathy" (p. 275). In a recent study which took place in a classroom setting with students aged six to eleven years, one child described the dog as being "a better friend than humans, because [the dog] played with him more and accepted him no matter what. In particular, he noted that dogs 'forgave better' than humans" (Anderson & Olson, 2006, p. 45). Although further research is required, the non-verbal warmth that a dog can offer children within the mentor-child relationship may uniquely support children's literacy efforts.

4. Common elements of positive relationships are caring, respect, responsibility and knowledge (p. 193).

Finally, if "common elements of positive relationships are caring, respect, responsibility, and knowledge" (Ellis, Small-McGinley, & De Fabrizio, 2001),

then the reciprocal care and respect between child, dog, and mentor may uniquely support and nurture relationship development. How might feelings of responsibility, care for, and meaningful, purposeful knowledge about the dog influence relationship dynamics and learning? Anderson and Olson (2006) found that when children were provided with daily interaction with an adult and dog over the course of eight weeks, students' attitudes improved towards school and "facilitated students' learning lessons in responsibility, respect and empathy" (p. 35), lessons which generalized to their classroom relationships with peers.

Future research is required to explore how gift-giving is experienced within animal-assisted literacy mentorship relationships, how a dog might shift children's initial and long-term perceptions of their mentors, how warmth and stability are experienced within animal-assisted literacy mentoring sessions, and how care, respect, responsibility, and knowledge are demonstrated within these unique relationship dynamics.

Goals and Guiding Principles of School-Based Mentorship Programs

According to de Anda (2001), the purpose of the mentor-protégé relationship "is to provide a supportive adult role model who will encourage the youth's social and emotional development, help improve his/her academic and career motivation and achievement, expand the youth's life experiences, redirect youth from at-risk behaviours, and foster an improved self-esteem" (p. 98-99). With a clear emphasis on the development of a trusting and positive relationship, a mentor's role is to "help the student develop life skills; assist students in

attaining additional resources; and help students in their ability to interact with others" (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2006, p. 158). In this view of mentoring, it is expected that both a child's self-esteem and educational experience will be enhanced, with the mentor viewed as not only a tutor but as a trusted friend (Jackson, 2002; Randolph & Johnson, 2008; Ellis, Small-McGinley, & De Fabrizio, 2001).

The term "best practices" is problematic when considering school-based teaching and learning due to the context-specific needs and interests of individual classrooms of students within unique communities. As emphasized by Allen (2010), "at the heart of best practices is the concept of generalizability which means that the practice can be successfully transferred to any other similar setting" (p. 80). Instead, what are defined as best practices for each mentoring program can only be determined by thoughtful consideration of the individual school and community context. Within each mentorship program, careful consideration of the following guiding principles may contribute to positive experiences for all involved:

> …monitoring of program implementation, careful screening of mentors, matching mentors and [protégés] on at least one criteria, pre-match and ongoing training for mentors, program supervision, support for mentors, some structured activities, parent support and/or involvement, and expectations for frequency of contact and duration of the mentoring relationship. (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2006, p. 152)

Dubois and colleagues (2002) suggest that consideration of these guiding principles enables the development of a strong personal relationship between mentors and protégés, which in turn significantly enhance the effects of mentoring programs.

Goals and Guiding Principles of School-Based Animal-Assisted Literacy Programs

Similar to school-based mentoring programs, the purpose of animal-assisted literacy mentoring programs is to support a child academically as well as enhance his or her self-esteem through a positive and supportive relationship with a gentle animal and a non-related adult. Orientation handbooks for animal-assisted literacy mentors urge volunteers to "provide an environment which makes reading a natural part of your pleasant social interaction," and advises that mentors do not "underestimate the power of [their] positive relationship to encourage and enhance [the] students' learning" (Pet Therapy Society of Northern Alberta: Paws for a Story, 2006, p. 15). Although existing animal-assisted school-based literacy programs offer a wealth of advice, tips, and strategies for the adult volunteer to assist them in supporting children's academic development and literacy skills in particular (see for example Reading Education Assistance Dogs: A Program of Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2007), careful attention needs to be paid to the necessary role of the adult as mentor, and the development of the mentor-protégé relationship specifically, when supporting a child during school-based animal-assisted literacy programs.

Incorporating All Language Arts Strands

Mentors involved in animal-assisted programs might consider possibilities for opening up the definition of literacy to include activities in addition to and outside of reading For example, animal-assisted literacy mentors might consider incorporating a wider range of activities into their sessions, and offer choices to the student with regard to the kinds of activities he or she is interested in participating in. Incorporating a variety of literacy activities into mentoring activities more adequately encompasses the broad conception of literacy as defined by the Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada (2008), the Alberta Learning Program of Studies (2000), and the National Council Teachers of English/International Reading Association Standards for the English Language Arts (2010). In addition, incorporating a broader range of literacy activities into animal-assisted literacy sessions may also contribute to relationship development between the literacy mentor, child, and dog because of the creativity, meaning, and sense of accomplishment often inspired while engaging in such activities. An overview of some suggested activities follows below in Table 2, which can be adapted to suit individual children's interests and abilities.

Table 2: Incorporating the Six Language Arts into Animal-Assisted Literacy Learning Sessions

Language Arts Strand	Animal-Assisted Literacy Activity
	• Children and mentors can read a range of texts (fiction and non-fiction), including but not limited to crossword puzzles, cartoons, animal joke books, newspaper

Reading	articles, and children's magazines. • Children can practice reading a developing piece of original writing to the dog as a 'non-judgemental' audience • Children can be encouraged to read a recipe and follow the instructions to bake home-made dog treats[12].
Writing	• Students can include the dog in story writing. For example, the child may imagine the dog in different settings and write about what he/she might do. • After reading animal jokes, students can write their own joke books as 'flap books' (a sticky note covers the answer to the joke on each page). • The child can write a letter (signed by him or herself as well as the dog's paw print) to one of his or her favourite authors. • Students can write a letter to the dog, or contribute to a 'dog blog' online. • Students can write a letter to their parents, their teacher, or to their principal about literacy learning with the dog, or write an article for the school newspaper or newsletter.
Speaking	• Children can practice a public speaking event by performing their presentation for the dog as audience. • Writing generated with the mentor and dog can be read to classmates in small groups (and maybe even to the entire class!) • Children can engage in a re-telling or summary of the main story events to the dog while 'doing a picture walk' (showing the pictures to the dog).
Listening	• All of the above activities are developed from the idea that the dog is an uncritical audience for the child's literacy learning efforts.
Viewing	• Children can photograph or paint pictures of the dog and/or their own pets and make a collage about how to care for a pet. • Students can use a wordless picture book to create a story to tell to the dog. • Video clips of a favourite story can be viewed on a lap-top computer with the mentor and dog to highlight similarities and differences of the text-based version and the video version of the story.
Representing	• Children can design a poster using both images and text to put on display and teach others about caring for a dog in general or about specific topics, such as how to

[12] Volunteers should ensure that the liability insurance that their particular animal-assisted literacy program has allows for the animal handler to provide treats to the dogs during their sessions before engaging in this activity.

	bath a dog or to provide information about a specific breed.
Activities Incorporating the Six Language Arts	• Children can create a game board about caring for a dog to teach to classmates and other children. • Puppet plays – students can perform student-generated jokes for real audiences using "Paper Dog Puppets " they have created. • As a springboard for a writing activity, the child can draw a picture of him or herself with the dog on a great adventure, or place the dog into a student-designed setting of a favourite fairy tale. For example, what might the child and dog do if they awoke one day to find themselves in Shrek's swamp or in a house with the seven dwarfs?

As defined by the R.E.A.D. program (2007), animal-assisted literacy mentors should display an enjoyment of children and a love of reading, demonstrate compassion, sensitivity, flexibility and patience, and must commit to weekly mentoring sessions as a role model and to regular grooming of their animal. Participating mentors and their dogs must be trained to be "registered therapy teams – screened, tested, and qualified in temperament and skills" (R.E.A.D., 2007, p. 37). However, similar to traditional school-based mentoring programs, the process for matching of mentors and protégés is largely dependent on the volunteers available for participation in the programs. Animal-assisted mentors have basic animal-assisted therapy training, three hours of R.E.A.D. training, and ongoing mentoring training as they become familiar with the program. Finally, parental support is necessary for animal-assisted literacy mentor programs to take place, particularly because children may have allergies to animals, may be fearful of animals, or may not be allowed to touch animals due to cultural or religious reasons (Friesen, 2009; Jalongo, 2005; R.E.A.D., 2007).

How Animal-Assisted Mentoring may Provide Valuable Educational, Emotional, and Social Support for Children

A Spirit of Prevention, Not Remediation

With an overall focus on a child's well-being, school-based mentoring programs open to all children emphasize prevention of academic and social/emotional difficulties (Dubois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Ellis, Small-McGinley, & De Fabrizio, 2001; Randolph & Johnson, 2008; Small-McGinley, 2000). This focus on prevention is significant for children's literacy because historically, "educators have generally waited for some children to fail at school and then offered remediation" (Ellis, Small-McGinley, & De Fabrizio, 2001, p. 43). Learning with a mentor while accompanied by a therapy dog may uniquely place the child in a position of power with an emphasis on the positive, or on possibilities, rather than a focus on deficits. In encouraging the child to get to know and read to the dog, the focus is taken off the child's skill deficit and re-directed towards showing the dog what he/she knows. For example, many animal-assisted literacy mentors suggest that when a child struggles with a word that they try to teach the dog the word together because the dog doesn't know that word either (Jalongo, 2005). Although both the child and the adult likely know that it is not probable that the dog will actually learn the word, it is the redirection of focus off of the child's own difficulties and the humour and fun of trying to teach a cuddly friend which adds an element of light-heartedness to the atmosphere. In reading to and empowering the child to be "teacher" to an uncritical audience,

with the available support of the adult mentor if requested, the child can be nested in a supportive and enjoyable atmosphere for learning.

Additional Literacy Support for Children

Particularly in an economic climate of crisis, many North American families are struggling not only with financial restraints but with a lack of the stability and peace of mind that accompanies the loss of economic security. Further, Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman, and Grossman (2005) argue that changing family patterns, large class sizes, and more disparate communities have negatively affected the number of caring adults in children's lives, particularly in urban environments. As Pressley (2001) acknowledges, "if a child's world is…filled with people who will work with her or him (i.e., tutor the child), early literacy development is also more certain" (p. 28). Finally, although teachers ask parents to read with their children at home each night, some parents simply do not have the time or the inclination to do so (Pressley, 2001). It also may be that parents are not always the best teachers for their children. Despite parents' best intentions, children may be reluctant to read with their parents because many children are able to detect even the slightest hint of their parents' disapproval.

Individualized Student Support

Randolph and Johnson (2008) acknowledge that schools are experiencing increased pressures to be accountable for student learning, yet "they have also experienced a substantial reduction in school resources for non-academic programs. Volunteer mentors can provide much additional support to help

alleviate these dilemmas" (p. 177). Ellis, Hart, and Small-McGinley (1998) suggest that having an extra person around for a student to talk to "brings great relief and comfort and frees the student to get on with his or her day and become available for constructivity" and is a prerequisite for students to make the most of their educational experience (p. 229). Similarly, opportunities to 'talk to' an animal in the school setting may provide children with a unique form of comfort and support. As Melson (2001) acknowledges, "dialogue with [animals] offers a time-out from the anxieties of human exchange…despite most children's acknowledgement that pets cannot literally comprehend what they are saying, children have the feeling of being heard and being understood" (p. 51).

Multi-Sensory Learning Experiences

Particularly at a time when teachers (and especially male teachers) have been warned against physical touch with their students (Frank, 2001), the multi-sensory experience offered to a child when provided supervised opportunities to hug and touch a soft, furry animal may offer untold benefits in the school setting. Although further research is required, one study indicates that conversation with children while interacting with a small animal seems to invite questioning, personal stories, and naturally occurring 'teachable moments' (Hunt & Hart, 2001). This research seems to suggest that when children are provided opportunities for multi-sensory interaction with animals, including touch, they may be more likely to engage in thinking processes such as questioning, and may be more likely to relate the encounter to their own experiences.

Nurturing Children's Imaginations

Spencer (2003) proposes that imagination "is not something separate or extra that their teachers add to [children's] learning" (p. 107). Rather, imagination is at the heart of children's meaning-making when they work with text, particularly as they engage with imaginative children's literature. Spencer emphasizes that children's authors create "worlds of possibilities" for children's imaginations, and, as explained by Vygotsky (1978), children "use imaginative language as they make worlds of play and stories" (p. 110). The popularity of children's books and book series such as Penguin that feature personified animals, Disney movies with animal stars such as Mickey Mouse and Bambi, and the popularity of stuffed animals provide several examples of children's common fascination with animals (Friesen, 2010; Melson, 2001). If so many children willingly enter into the imaginary worlds of Disney-animated animal characters, it is not be difficult to envision the playful possibilities for children when they are invited to read to a responsive yet unconditional audience such as a dog.

Further, Church (2006) notes that many young children keep one foot planted inside reality and one foot outside of it, as is illustrated by their wavering belief in Santa Claus. Rosoff (2007) defines play as "stepping out of the confines of reality to imagine new identities and scenarios" (p. 59), and points out that play offers a safe context for practicing necessary skills for later use. As illustrated by the examples offered in Table 1, because play offers both an escape from and a preparation for reality (Ackerman, 1999; Rosoff, 2007), children may experience

an unconventional freedom during animal-assisted literacy learning sessions to practice and internalize important literacy skills.

The Ripple Effect: Benefits Beyond the Child

It should also be noted that the benefits of animal-assisted mentorship may not only be enjoyed by the child, but may positively extend into the community through a mutually satisfying experience for the mentor and for the participating animal. In addition to the obvious enjoyment a mentor may experience through developing a meaningful relationship with a non-related child, Jackson (2002) acknowledges that mentoring programs can assist adults in learning to listen to children more carefully, how to effectively coach and give feedback to children, and how to act as role models for successful problem-solving and appropriate behaviour. For the animals themselves, benefits can be derived from the increased socialization from being around children on a regular basis, and from more empathetic treatment by children as a result of naturally occurring teachable moments about the unique needs of animals which often arise through supervised interaction with an animal. As Jalongo (2008) acknowledges, although dog bites are common among children they can be prevented through ensuring that the dogs are trained and appropriately handled, and with age-appropriate modeling of empathetic and appropriate behaviour by a responsible adult.

In addition, the knowledge children glean from these positive experiences with animals at school may have direct implications for their home lives. Along with the literacy learning experienced during such sessions, increased possibilities

for spontaneously generated lessons in the interdependence of and empathy for all living things, and potential for transference of knowledge for how to care for and interact with an animal, such as a dog, are likely to be shared at home with siblings and parents. Given that over 50% of Canadian families own pets (Ontario Veterinary Medical Association, 2007) with dogs and cats being most common in homes with children (Melson, 2001), it is significant that the positive tacit learning children pick up from animal-assisted literacy learning sessions may carry over into their experiences with animals outside of the school context.

Closing Remarks

> "Ultimately, the success lies in the magic that can unfold between mentor and child" (Ellis, Small-McGinley, & De Fabrizio, 2001, p. 113).

Literacy research indicates that when a child is afraid to take risks, it is very difficult for literacy learning to occur (Cambourne, 1988). Animal-assisted literacy mentorship opportunities may be particularly valuable for the child who needs gentle and focused attention not otherwise possible in a busy classroom. Some children are painfully shy, while still others have likely not been inspired or given enough one-on-one adult support to engage and succeed in literacy. In short, many children would likely smile at an opportunity to learn with a mentor and therapy dog, relationships that children may view as being outside of the usual and complex expectations of school and family life. Further research is required to achieve a deeper understanding of the dynamics undergirding animal-assisted literacy learning and to explore the significance of animal-assisted

learning experiences for children and mentors. However, the global popularity of animal-assisted literacy programs uncovers a tension between the literacy support that children are currently receiving in classrooms and the kinds of assistance they might need or want. A closer examination of the roles of the adult, the child, and the dog in animal-assisted literacy programs may assist literacy educators in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of possibilities for this pedagogical innovation.

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CHAPTER 4:

Description of the Study Research Method and Data Analysis[13]

This paper is organized into three sections, each of which attends to important aspects of the study design and analysis. The first section provides an overview of the research methodology and details information regarding the research site, the participants, and the researcher stance. This section also discusses procedures involved in gaining access to the research site and outlines special considerations and human and animal ethics involved in research which proposes to incorporate animals (and dogs in particular) into the elementary school and classroom setting. Section two delineates data collection procedures involved in this research study, including considerations for establishing a climate of trust and safety upon entry into the classroom. This section also provides an overview of what a typical dog-assisted literacy session involved, and offers specific and detailed information regarding the procedures and ongoing analysis of pre-interviews, interviews, and the role of the critical friend within the context of this study. Finally, section three offers a detailed description of in-depth data analysis both during and following the study in conversation with researchers who have written extensively about qualitative methodology (specifically, Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Merriam, 2009; Richardson, 1988, 1997; and Tesch, 1990). This

[13] *A version of this chapter was presented for the Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada at the Canadian Society for the Study of Education conference in Montréal, 2010. This manuscript has also been revised as an invited, edited book chapter for the Springer book series "Educating the Young Child: Advances in Theory and Research, Implications for Practice" in the volume titled "Teaching Compassion: Humane Education in Early Childhood" under the revised title, "Guidelines for Thoughtful Entry and Sustained Involvement in Animal-Assisted Literacy Mentoring Programs in Elementary Classrooms."*

section includes initial coding and conceptual category procedures, and subsequent rounds of coding in connection to theory.

Overview of Research Methodology

An interpretive case study was well suited for studying an animal-assisted literacy program because case studies seek a level of analysis which provides insights that affect and improve practice (Merriam, 1998). During a three-month period, I visited the classroom for two mornings each week with my two trained therapy dogs, Tango and Sparky, who are both non-shedding Maltese-poodles. Each week, the students were invited to sign up for 20 minute individual or paired reading sessions with myself and the therapy dog of their choice in a partitioned section of the classroom (made possible by using a folding privacy screen) during regular language arts class periods. I provided a soft blanket and several cushions for the students and me to sit on, along with a dog bed, which was typically placed in the middle of the group. I designed a sign-up chart complete with laminated magnets with each of the children's names printed on them. Each week, the teacher would draw names randomly out of a basket, and the selected children could sign up for a small-group literacy session (usually two students per group) with either Tango or Sparky on either Tuesday or Thursday.

Data for this study were collected through video and audio-recording of the literacy sessions; audio-recorded interviews at three points during the study with selected students and the teacher, and with twelve of the students' parents towards the end of the study; a ‘dog-blog’ with the children; and the collection of

relevant student literacy artifacts (i.e. student-generated writing or letters to the dog). To assist in achieving triangulation of data, a 'critical friend' (Costa & Kallick, 1993), a PhD colleague, periodically reviewed and provided feedback on video-recorded data to assist me in becoming more sharply self-evaluative (Perkins, 1991). Towards the end of the study, data were analyzed to identify themes and patterns (Creswell, 2008) to gain an understanding of the roles and practices of the participants, and of the potential significance of animal-assisted literacy learning for grade 2 literacy learners.

The research site

The public school in which this study took place is in an affluent rural district in Central Alberta. The population of this school was approximately 390 students and included students from grades K-6. The research site was one of the three grade 2 classrooms in the school. Although animal-assisted programs have been incorporated into programs for individuals across the lifespan, Nimer and Lundhahl indicate in their 2007 meta-analysis that young children (defined as 12 years and younger) "consistently benefitted across all outcome variables… [while] other age groups were less consistent in the degree to which they benefitted from AAT" (p. 234). The authors note that "while the reasons for these patterns are not known, it may be that young children are more accepting of an animal's influence" (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007, p. 234). Therefore, a class of grade 2 children was an appropriate choice for participation in this study. The students were pre-screened for allergies or children's fear of the selected animals. My study took place in this classroom for two mornings each week from early

October to December of 2009. The therapy dogs and I visited the classroom during the class's language arts periods for two mornings each week as agreed upon by the teacher, the school administrators, and myself.

The participants

The participants consisted of all students in one Grade 2 classroom: eighteen students (eleven girls and seven boys) and their teacher, twelve of the parents of the students, two therapy dogs, and myself. All of the students in the class were invited to participate in the study after their parents had provided informed consent. The consent forms were sent home to the parents on Friday, September 11, 2009; I was surprised to receive an email the following Monday from Michelle (the classroom teacher) telling me that she already had all of the signed consent forms back from the parents except one (and it came in the following day), along with a message from Michelle indicating how excited the parents seemed to be that their children would have an opportunity to be involved in this program! My initial meeting with the school principal (a self-proclaimed dog lover) and informal conversations with the school secretaries confirmed that this site would be a supportive environment for a study of this nature.

Role of the researcher, children, and dogs

During the animal-assisted literacy sessions with the students, my role was that of a researcher and literacy mentor, attending carefully to the quality of the relationship between the child, the dog, and myself, as well as on nurturing emerging literacy skills (Ellis et al., 2001). From the beginning of my study, I

wondered how the children would perceive the dog's role, their own roles, and my role during our sessions. How might we involve the dog in literacy learning activities? Would the children want to teach the dog? Would the children view the dog as a group member? Would the children believe the dog to be an audience for their reading and in developing self-authored stories? Might the group dynamics shift (and if so, how?) depending on whether the children were reading or writing with a particular dog or when engaging in different activities (i.e., reading or writing)?

Gaining access: Their heads are going to explode!

Because of my work with the Pet Therapy Society of Northern Alberta and with the Chimo Project, word of my research interest spread quickly within the local animal-assisted community. Through word of mouth alone, teachers in three different districts, who were interested in participating in my study, contacted me even before I had passed my candidacy exam. Once I had both human and animal ethics approval for my study design, I met with five teachers who taught grades one through three to discuss my proposed research. In the end, this district, school, and classroom were selected because one particular teacher, Michelle, was currently teaching Grade 2, had 17 years' experience teaching in K-6, and had clearly established classroom management routines. When bringing any live animal into a classroom of young children, the establishment of clear routines is essential to ensure the safety and well-being of all participants (including the animals). Further, the selected school was located in a community outside of the

city in which I was currently living, which would minimize the possibility that I would know any of the staff or students at the research site.

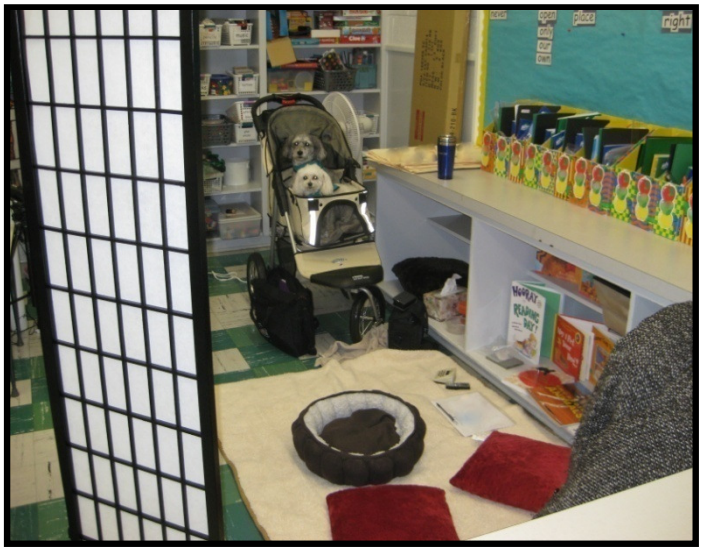
Upon receiving Cooperative Activities Program, human ethics, and animal ethics approval (described below), I went to the school to meet with Michelle. I was curious about how she thought her students might benefit from participation in this study, and I felt that her wealth of experience would enhance the insights that might be possible. When she introduced me to one of the teachers at her school and told her about my project, her face lit up and she said, “Have you told your students yet? Oh, their heads are going to explode when you tell them!” It seemed that, from the outset, I wasn’t the only one who was excited about this project.

Special considerations

The possibilities for my study paralleled the effort I made to protect the children from possible harm, either physical or psychological. Special considerations were in place to ensure the safety and well-being of all participants. My study was limited to entry into an elementary school where administration and staff granted permission and access to a trained dog and its handler. However, proper precautions minimized potential problems. For example, the dogs entered and left the school in a specially designed and enclosed 'dog stroller' thus limiting potential contact between the dog and students not participating in the study. This stroller was a big hit with the staff and students, and it served the practical function of ensuring that the dogs would have a private

space for rest whenever it was required. Using the stroller also allowed me to keep the dogs enclosed but with me whenever I needed to visit other areas of the school, and made the practical aspects of transporting piles of books, recording equipment, etc manageable.

Parent and teacher concerns about allergies and cleanliness may affect decisions to grant permission to have a dog in the classroom. Therefore, the classroom I selected was one that was receptive to dogs and which I had pre-screened for allergies or fear of the selected animals (Johnson, Odendaal, & Meadows, 2002). The participating dogs were rigorously screened, registered, and trained as therapy dogs with The Pet Therapy Society of Northern Alberta and with the Chimo Animal Assisted Therapy Project. This means that the animals were well groomed and had a clean bill of health, had basic obedience training and had been tested for having an appropriate temperament for working in classroom environments with children (Jalongo, Astorino, & Bomboy, 2004).



Animal ethics

This inquiry was conducted within the ethical guidelines of Animal Care and Use Protocol at the University of Alberta. To ensure the health and comfort of the animals during the course of the study, water and the enclosed dog stroller were provided for the dogs whenever needed, and regular exercise breaks were provided at least twice during each morning. Two dogs were included in my study to ensure that stress did not become an issue for the animals. Although both dogs were present in the classroom for two mornings each week over ten weeks, only one dog interacted with the children at a time. If initial signs of stress became apparent, the dog would be given a rest while the other took over.[14] Each dog participated in only two sessions on average, or three sessions maximum, with the children each morning that they were in the classroom. Both dogs are the same breed (Maltese-Poodle) and are well groomed, do not shed, and have been well socialized around children in the classroom context. Appropriate treats, toys, and water were provided for the animals during the two mornings they were in the classroom each week. Treats were only given to the dogs by children under the direct supervision of the researcher and after the first four weeks of the study, when the children were comfortable with the dogs and vice versa. Finally, the children washed their hands using a no-soap sanitizer I provided both before and after contact with the dog during each session; before, to protect the dog, and after

[14] However, this option did not need to be exercised during the course of this study. Limiting the dogs' interaction time with students to two sessions on average each morning seemed to satisfactorily minimize the potential for stress on the animals.

to protect the child and to ensure their hands were clean following interaction with the dog.

Prior to the beginning of the study, the dogs were provided with opportunities to visit the school after hours to become familiar with the environment. Because the researcher was a participant in this study, the animals were under the direct supervision of the researcher at all times while in the school/classroom. Under no circumstances was an animal left unsupervised when interacting with a child. Both dogs went home with the researcher following each morning in the classroom.

Human ethics

My inquiry into how children experience literacy learning with a therapy dog was conducted within the ethical guidelines of the Faculties of Education, Extension, Augustana and Saint-Jean Research Ethics Board (EEASJ:REB) at the University of Alberta. Prior to the beginning of my study, information letters and consent forms for the school district, parents, the classroom teacher, and the school administration were provided and clearly explained to ensure that all participants had been given opportunity for free and informed consent. The children were invited to sign their own assent forms. I clarified for the participants that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty or prejudice, and the anonymity and confidentiality of all participants has been protected.

Procedures and Data Collection

Entry into the classroom: Establishing a climate of trust and safety

As I have written elsewhere (Friesen, 2009a), a common concern with animal-assisted programs involves the safety of the children. To ensure that the students interacted with the dogs in a safe and caring way throughout the study, I arranged to come into the classroom for two afternoons at the beginning of the study and prior to the beginning of our small-group literacy sessions to teach the children about how to meet a new dog they don't know, and to discuss how a dog's needs are similar to and different from our own needs. Although I was clearly in the role of 'teacher' during these first two days, my role shifted significantly when we fell into the rhythm of our regularly scheduled small-group literacy sessions. (Because of my familiarity with the topic, the teacher had requested that I teach these lessons to the students myself). The lessons from the first two days were adapted from American Humane (2009) and from Jalongo's (2008) article entitled *Teaching young children to interact safely with dogs.* My rationale for including these lessons at the beginning of my study is as follows:

> The national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that of the 80,000 Americans seeking medical attention for dog bites each year, half are children. The rate is highest among children aged 5 to 9 years, and that rate increases the younger the child. By the time children turn 12, half of them have been bitten by a dog, the overwhelming majority of which belong to friends or family. Sadly, many injuries may be the result of inappropriate behaviour on the part of the child, as most children have not learned how to act around dogs. Teaching children appropriate behaviour around dogs can significantly help reduce their chances of being bitten. By learning appropriate ways to act around dogs, children will not only be safer, but will also develop respect and responsibility for their actions.

> Finally, by understanding how dogs feel in certain situations, children will hone a sense of empathy for the feelings and needs of others. (American Humane Association, 2009)

The following are excerpts from my field notes that emphasize key aspects of these lessons:

Thursday, October 1, 2009

For our first lesson, I felt that it was important that the students 1. get to meet the dogs, 2. feel confident while doing so, and 3. take ownership in the process of involving the dogs and I in their classroom. Therefore, we spent the first half-hour discussing, role-playing, and practicing how to meet a dog in a safe and caring way, and then in groups of 3 children, they each got a chance to come to the back of the room to meet Tango and Sparky. In setting up our first meeting this way, not only did I manage to work in some one-on-one time and practice of an important skill for each child, but it helped Tango and Sparky to feel safe and comfortable in this new environment just as much as the children.

The second half of the class was taken up with talking about what we need to be healthy and happy, and then what dogs might need to be healthy and happy. Then we discussed what we could do in their classroom to make sure that the dogs were happy and healthy while they were there. We generated a list of things that dogs need, and then I took the students over to the area of the classroom where we would be working together. I showed them the materials that I had brought (pillows, a blanket, a dog bed, a water dish for the dogs, and a small kennel) and asked them if they thought that this would work all right in their classroom, and if they thought there was anything else that we might need. Upon a child's suggestion that the dogs should have food and toys, we talked about the pros and cons of these items in the classroom and decided that it probably wouldn't be a good idea until the dogs knew them a little bit better because dogs can be protective of these kinds of things. We talked about how the dogs would be fed before they came and again when they were finished their work in the classroom (just like them - they could eat on their breaks and at home, but not in the classroom). I also mentioned that I was going to bring in a screen so that we wouldn't be a distraction for other kids when we were working there – so that tomorrow when I show up with it they won't be completely shocked.

To end the class, we played a game called 'pass the collar' to the tune of "My dog's bigger than your dog," a Charlie Brown and quite hilarious singing classic. As the children sat in a circle, they passed the collar as the music played. Then

when the music stopped, whoever was holding the collar had to tell one thing that dogs need to be safe and healthy, without repeating what had already been mentioned. They seemed to really enjoy this and I think it helped to solidify what we had learned that day. Finally, I gave each student a sticker with a picture of Tango and Sparky on it that said, "I met Tango and Sparky today!" I think the stickers were quite the hit. My hope was that the children would bring these stickers home to inform their Moms and Dads about what was happening in their classroom. (Field notes, p. 4)

At the end of this first day, it struck me again how carefully orchestrated entry into the research site needs to be, particularly for a study of this nature. Had I gone in cold, not setting the students up for success in their first interaction with the dog, not encouraging them to take ownership in the design of the sessions and then rewarding them for the small successes we've already had together, our first interactions would likely be very, very different. Because I had guided them towards a small individual success each, they seemed to be looking forward to our next interaction.

Friday, October 2, 2009

I brought the dogs in while everyone was at recess and gave them a few minutes to check out the classroom again. Then I put the dogs into the kennel while the students came in from recess and got settled. The students had remembered our rule about not touching the kennel and strained to see the dogs from their desks – this really is a well-mannered group of students. I was amazed at how not even one child (and there seems to be always at least one!) wanted to try to break the rule – but maybe it's because it is a purposeful rule - or maybe it's because we are still in the honeymoon phase of our relationship. I began the day by reviewing what we had learned the day before, and then each student had an opportunity to meet the dogs at their desks, asking first, "May I pet your dog?" and then letting the dog sniff their hand before reaching around to pet him/her. Once they were done petting the dog, they could go and take a seat on the back carpet. Tango and Sparky seemed quite relaxed with the students, and happily trotted up and down the rows to meet each child. It has occurred to me on more than one occasion how important it is that these dogs have classroom experience already, and how teaching the children to interact with dogs safely and with care encourages the

dogs to know that the children are safe to interact with, and therefore positively influences the way they interact with the students. They seem to be building trust on both sides – it's really quite amazing to watch!

We spent some time this afternoon talking about how dogs show that they are happy, relaxed, scared, nervous, etc. by thinking about their own dogs or dogs that they know. We used Tango as an example, as she slept stretched out with her eyes closed on top of the kennel (an example of a very relaxed and happy dog). One student said that she knew she was happy because Tango was 'smiling.'

Then we talked about things we should do and things we shouldn't do when we are around dogs. Each child selected a sentence strip with a number on the back of it from a bag. I prepared a poster board, divided in half, labelled "Do" and "Don't" and invited the students to come up and put their sentence card on the side of the chart where they felt it belonged. The rest of the group needed to demonstrate whether they agreed (thumbs up) or not (thumbs down). This encouraged active participation and active listening on the part of the students. There was no arguing over who got to go next, because they each had a number and knew when their turn was coming up. Following this activity, I asked the students to make a 'pledge' (a promise) to do all of the positive things that we had talked about. It was pretty cute, we all put up our right hand as we promised.

I then read the assent forms to the students and we talked about what a 'signature' is. They seemed to feel pretty important that THEY got to sign their own forms, and I was clear to explain again that they didn't have to do this if they didn't want to. Every student printed his or her name and 'signed' their form. For this section of the class, Tango went into the kennel and Sparky happily trotted around the classroom with me to pick up the student assent forms from the students.

I was reminded that how the dog feels about being in the classroom absolutely influences the kinds of interactions that the children can have with the dog; the more relaxed the dogs are, the more playful and engaging they will be with the students. For the third time today (it happened twice yesterday as well!), Sparky engaged Tango in play, right in front of the students. Lots of giggles from the students, pointing, and laughter. I absolutely love those sounds in a classroom.

We ended the lesson with a 12 minute video by the American Humane Association which reviewed a lot of what we had learned over the last two days. Some of the students would smile and look over at me periodically because they had just learned many of the same lessons that were emphasized in the video. It was neat

to see how empowered the students seemed to be – they were already becoming 'experts' on how to be safe around dogs. (Field notes, p. 5)

A typical literacy session

The following week, the students were invited to sign up for their first literacy session with the dog of their choice. Typically, when I arrived in the morning I would set up the pillows, the books (often with the assistance of several children), the room divider, and the video and audio recorder. I set a timer for twenty minutes and kept a record of which students were signed up for which time slot and with which dog. When the first pair of children arrived, they would wash their hands with hand sanitizer, and we would take a few minutes for hellos and conversation. During this time, some children typically wanted to 'get cuddles' from the dog, others wanted to tell me a story or just talk, while others wanted to dive right in and either choose a book or start working on a story they were writing. I would ask the students if they wanted to read or write today. If there was disagreement about the book we were going to read, the students played 'rock, paper, scissors' to

determine the story we would read. If they chose to write, I provided lap-top cushions for the children to use to write on (see photo). If they chose to read, the students were invited to bring one of their own books or choose from a selection I had brought from home. In selecting books to bring each week, I was careful to include a range of fiction and non-fiction texts (many of which featured animals), in addition to holiday-themed literature (for example for Thanksgiving, Halloween, or Christmas), kids poetry, and high quality topically selected literature as I became more aware of individual students' interests.

Towards the end of each session, the children were invited to have the dog do a trick (typically 'sit' and/or 'shake a paw') for a small treat.[15] Then, the students could choose a stamp on their hand (a paw print stamp in gold ink) or a sticker (with a picture of the dog and a phrase such as "I read/wrote with Tango/Sparky today!" My hope behind giving the students a stamp or a sticker was that it might facilitate conversation with the children's parents about their reading and writing with Tango and/or Sparky.[16] At the end of their session, the children would wash their hands again with sanitizer and get the next pair of students. When reviewing the videos of these literacy sessions each afternoon following data collection throughout the course of the study, I kept a record of the children's participation, including which children signed up to be with each dog,

[15] As previously mentioned, having the dogs do tricks for treats only began after the fourth week of the study, once the children seemed quite comfortable around the dogs and vice-versa, and only after I had modelled how to properly give a treat to a dog for the children on several occasions. Of course, giving the dog a treat was always optional for the children.

[16] However, instead, these stickers typically ended up featured in the students' sticker books, or pasted onto their desks, notebooks, or backpacks.

whether each group chose to read or write during their session, and which book they chose and/or the topic of their writing.

Pre-interview activities

Because my entry question was "How do children experience literacy learning with a therapy dog?" I began my inquiry with the use of pre-interview activities with the entire class, and incorporated this technique into three stages of my study. The first pre-interview activity took place prior to the introduction of the dog in the classroom, the second approximately half-way through the study, and the last towards the end of the study.

Pre-interview activities are recommended when working with children and are defined by Ellis (2006) as activities that can be used to "support getting-to-know-you conversations with a child, enable the child to teach the researcher about the context of interest, [and] provide the child with the opportunity to recall and select memories to share" (p. 118). This technique was particularly well suited to my inquiry because it allowed the children to tell their own stories and therefore assisted me in gaining a clearer understanding of what literacy learning with a therapy dog might be about for these children.

I incorporated suggestions from Ellis (2006), such as the creation of “all about me” pictures prior to the introduction of the therapy dog in the classroom. These projects were designed as paper 't-shirts' and featured pictures of the children engaging in their favourite activities and included a synopsis of their favourite things, pets, people, and places. This project was completed by all students, by the teacher, and by me prior to the beginning of the study. I also made a 't-shirt' for Tango and Sparky to share with the students that highlighted some of their favourite things, such as treats, walks, and love. The students shared their t-shirts with myself and with the dog during their first small-group literacy session (see photo above) as well as during their interviews.

These pre-interview activities at the beginning of the study served as a way for me to begin to get to know these students and to learn some background information about their home and school life. To assist me in beginning to develop insight into who these children were, I designed a chart highlighting the information gleaned from these initial projects. Because I was curious about whether or not these sessions might be experienced very differently for children who did or didn't have pets and/or siblings or if the sessions might hold different significance for children with/without pets and/or siblings or an attentive adult at home, I paid careful attention to the kinds of pets children had at home along with the kinds of things children said about their families, their interests, their likes and their dislikes. I continued to add information to this document throughout the study as I learned more about the students from their interviews, subsequent literacy sessions, and from the interviews with their teacher and with many of

their parents. This ongoing analysis assisted me in beginning to see patterns emerge and to form tentative categories, as well as to help me to contextualize surprises and design follow-up questions.

Mid-way through the study, the students were invited to write letters and draw pictures for one of the dogs/both of the dogs or to the dogs and me. These letters and pictures served as the springboard for discussion during the mid-round interviews. I engaged in an analysis of the children's letters and pictures to the dogs to examine what featured in the children's writing. In particular, I paid attention to the following aspects of the children's letters:

- specific comments about reading and writing with the dogs and me (and the anticipation of it)
- which dog(s) the children wrote to (and whether or not they wrote to me also)
- which children wrote poems or songs to the dogs
- who mentioned that they liked or loved the dogs (and why)
- the nature of the compliments the children gave to the dogs
- wishes (i.e. "I wish you [Tango and Sparky] came every day")
- questions the children asked the dogs and the nature of these questions
- whether or not the children asked the dog(s) to write back to them

These letters assisted me in beginning to develop an understanding of how these children were experiencing the literacy sessions by the kinds of things they said to the dogs and I and by the kinds of questions they asked. They also informed my understanding of whether or not individual children were beginning to develop a clear preference for one dog over the other and if so, why (and whether or not

there was a gender association here) by who the child addressed his or her letter to. I then contrasted this information with the chart indicating which dog the child had signed up with each week, and followed up emerging hypotheses by asking the children (and later their parents) about having a favourite dog during their mid-round interviews. Interestingly, in many cases, when children had signed up to be with one dog consistently each week, had addressed their letters to and drawn pictures of the same dog, and had talked about the same dog at home to their parents, these children would then insist that they didn't have a favourite dog when asked during their interview. When I asked their parents about this, the parents would often say that their child admitted that he/she didn't want to hurt the other dog's feelings.

The kinds of writing the children did in their letters also informed me about what they believed about the dogs and how they perceived the dog's role (and sometimes my own role). The pictures the children drew were a rich source of information as well, and served as a springboard for our mid-round interviews. I paid particular attention to who was featured in the children's pictures. For example, did they draw only one dog in particular and was there a reason for this? Were books featured in their drawings, and if so, which books? Did the children draw the other students as well? Was everyone smiling and/or talking? Was I included in the picture? Did the children draw the privacy screen and did it seem important to them? Did the children include any writing in their pictures and if so, what kinds of writing did they do?

Towards the end of the study, the students completed posters that featured words and pictures describing their experience at the beginning, middle, and end of the study. This final activity served to confirm what seemed to be emerging significant themes, words, phrases, or aspects of the students' experience.

Interviews

It is difficult for me to write a brief synopsis of what was, for me, one of the most enlightening aspects of doing classroom-based research: interviewing children. Although I was a classroom teacher for eight years prior to beginning my PhD (with five of those years teaching grade 2), I found myself continually surprised and delighted by how my participants chose to express their unique views of the world in relation to my research topic. However, due to space restrictions, I will limit myself here to attending briefly to the nature of these interviews.

A total of 37 interviews inform this study, and all interviews were transcribed and analyzed for emerging themes and patterns. All 18 children were interviewed, either individually or in small groups of no more than three students, at three times during the study. Although I had initially planned to do individual interviews with the children, I noticed that there seemed to be a great deal more conversation and depth to students' comments when I tried interviewing the students in pairs or in small groups. The students seemed much more willing to share and would elaborate on their answers; when I would ask a question, although one child might answer spontaneously, the others would typically join in and either confirm, disagree, and/or add in more information that they believe is relevant. I was surprised that seemingly shy children (whom I had tried

interviewing individually) seemed much more willing to share when they were able to observe other students taking verbal risks in the small group first. This richness within group interview conversations at the same time invited challenges around time; the teacher had kindly allowed me to interview the children during regular class time, and I was careful to ensure that I did not take up too much of it. Ensuring that the children were somewhat focused during interviews to minimize potential classroom disruption was an additional challenge at times, as the interviews commonly took place at the back of the classroom (due to school space restrictions) in the same space where we held our animal-assisted literacy sessions, but without the dogs.[17]

The classroom teacher was also interviewed three times during the study: during the first week, in the fifth week, and in the last week. Towards the end of the study, I invited the parents of the students to come to the school for one-on-one interviews. Because it was the week before Christmas holidays and therefore a very busy time of the year for many families, I was quite surprised when twelve of the students' parents volunteered to either come to the school to be interviewed (nine parents) or to participate in a phone interview (three parents). For those who preferred a face-to-face interview, I arranged to use the school counsellor's office and parents came to meet with me at pre-determined times.

Hutchinson and Wilson (1994) describe the role of the researcher in interviews with a focus on the ontological, or "the lived experience" (p. 303).

[17] Because the dogs had already participated in literacy sessions earlier in the morning with the children, I typically would put them in my car while I interviewed the students to minimize potential for stress due to extended periods in the classroom. Also, I learned that if I kept the dogs in their stroller in the classroom, the students would continually ask for them to come out.

They define the role of the researcher as one who asks an over-arching, or 'grand tour' question at the beginning of the interview, and then listens carefully, and only asks questions for clarification. I typically followed this format during my interviews, while also taking opportunities to ask questions to assist in the affirmation or refutation of themes I was coming to see emerge within the students' participation. Weber (1986) speaks to the interview as a genuine "invitation to conversation" (p. 65), and clarifies that mutual trust and genuine care is essential in developing a relation between the participant and researcher. All of my interactions, and particularly those within interviews with the children in my study, were guided by sincere care. Weber discusses the importance of maintaining the integrity and trust of the relationship between researcher and participant in this natural, yet unnatural, experience; although there is a great opportunity for an intimate understanding of the topic and relation to another, the power ultimately rests in the hands of the researcher, who will choose which aspects of this conversation will be shared with the world. In my study, at all times I worked to maintain an ethic of care and a genuine respect for the participants and the delicate nature of these relationships.

The critical friend

The concept of a 'critical friend' can be valuable in various contexts, including classrooms. I incorporated the concept of the 'critical friend' into my study to aid in the analysis of classroom video recordings so that I might receive ongoing critical and supportive responses to my work, and so I could "become more sharply self-evaluative" (Perkins, 1991). Costa and Kallick (1993)

acknowledge that it is through 'changing the lens' that one is able to gain a new perspective on their work. "A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented" (p. 50). Critical friendships are built upon a foundation of trust; the critical friend must be a good listener, maintain the integrity of the work, and offer criticism only when it is requested. In the context of my study, the critical friend was a PhD Candidate at the University of Alberta with an extensive literacy background in both the classroom and in private practice. It may also be important to note that although the critical friend who was asked to participate in this study is respectful of dogs, she is quite indifferent in her attitude towards them.

Costa and Kallick (1993) outline six broadly designed stages in the critical friend process. In my study, after I provided background information of the video that my critical friend was going to view, she asked questions in an attempt to gain a full understanding of what she was going to be viewing. For example, the critical friend may ask if this is the first time the child has worked with the therapy dog, or if the child gets to choose the activity (s)he is about to do with myself and the dog. I then "set desired outcomes for [the] conference." For example, I may have been particularly interested in how the dog's role might be defined in this particular context. Next, "the critical friend provides feedback about what seems significant about the practice" (p. 50), which may act as a new lens through which to view my work. During this discussion, the critical friend's role was to encourage the consideration of alternative perspectives. Finally, the process concluded when both the critical friend and I wrote reflections about the

discussion, the questions raised, and the implications for my work. As part of these reflections, the critical friend sometimes chose to offer suggestions or advice for my consideration. Although the critical friend for my study did observe videos of the literacy sessions at three times during the course of data collection and offered valuable insights and questions to assist me in focusing and refining my attention, it has been her ongoing support and our many informal follow-up phone conversations following the study that have been the most valuable tool and stimulus for my thinking.

On Data Analysis

It seems quite odd to incorporate a separate section of writing on 'data analysis' when analysis is an ongoing, integral part of qualitative research. As Coffey and Atkinson (1996) note, novice researchers

> often start from the position of 'I've collected all of this data, now what should I do?' Others start from an equally problematic position of 'I've collected all my data, now I'm going to analyze it and write it up.' Both positions imply a woeful lack of appreciation of what is and what can be meant by analysis (p. 10).

Tesch (1990) argues that "analysis is not the last phase in the research process; it is concurrent with data collection or cyclic" (p. 96). Because I had been writing and thinking about my research topic for nearly two years prior to beginning my study, I find it impossible to believe that I *couldn't* have begun analyzing and trying to make sense of what my participants were experiencing from the moment I set foot in my research classroom. In fact, it seemed that every conversation I had, every interaction with my participants, contributed to a complex and ongoing

conversation of affirmation or refutation in my mind and on paper with other authors, with other researchers. While I relished the freedom and creativity that case study research allowed, I periodically experienced what can only be described as intermittent waves of terror due to the lack of standardization it entailed. In these moments, turning to the literature on qualitative data analysis further contributed to my sense of ambiguity. As Tesch (1990) notes, whenever qualitative researchers describe their methods, "they are usually quite eager to point out that this is just one way of doing it, which others should feel free to adopt as much as they see fit, and modify and embellish it according to their own needs and ideas" (p. 4). Merriam (2009) contributes to this feeling of unease for the novice researcher seeking direction, stating that in her thirty years of teaching and advising doctoral students "one can read about data analysis, even take a course in it, but it isn't until you work with your own data trying to answer your own research questions that you really see how data analysis 'works' in qualitative research" (p. 175).

Throughout data collection in my study, continued rudimentary analysis allowed me to refine and focus my attention. I continually transcribed interviews with the students and with their teacher almost immediately after they took place during the course of my study, noting surprises, curiosities, confirmations of tentative hypotheses, and words, phrases and/or themes that seemed somehow repetitious as the participants spoke. I continually jotted down follow-up questions I wanted to ask participants and made note of particular themes and patterns that seemed to be emerging, further informed by my field note

observations and by the charts I had developed from the children's pre-interview activities. These observations and questions were then transferred into topics I asked about during the next set of interviews to assist me in either confirming or challenging this information. Because I had focused primarily on my own observations of the literacy sessions from reviewing each video-tape of each session following each day of data collection, coupled with student pre-interviews/interviews and teacher interviews and student literacy artifacts, interviewing the parents of 12 of the children in the class towards the end of the study provided an invaluable perspective and assisted in the triangulation of data. Data from these interviews served to further refine and confirm themes that seemed to have been emerging up until that point, and shed new light on aspects of how the children had been experiencing their participation in these sessions.

Initial coding and conceptual categories

Although I had engaged in ongoing analysis throughout the course of my study, I engaged in intensive data analysis several weeks following data collection. Because I had so many different sources of data, I needed to find a way to organize and display them in a way that would enable me to not only retrieve pieces of data efficiently, but which would allow me to recognize the source of each piece of data immediately. I have always been a very visual person, and colour appeals to me. Therefore, I chose to sort and organize my data sources according to colour. As I developed each of my categories and sub-categories inductively from the data, they were assigned the colour black. As I worked through my data, each source of data that seemed to fit within a category or sub-

category was assigned a colour. I kept a master list of all categories and sub-categories as they developed and evolved to maintain awareness of the over-all shape of the developing categories (and to facilitate quick retrieval), and a separate document in which I inserted each piece of data as it was coded.

The following legend thus developed out of the data:

Interviews with students - beginning of the study (purple)

Interview with teacher - beginning of the study (pink)

Field notes (ninety pages throughout the study) (bright blue)

Interviews with students - middle of the study (green)

Interview with the teacher - middle of the study (orange)

Children's letters and pictures for the dogs - middle of the study (brown)

Interviews with parents - end of the study (red)

Interviews with students - end of the study Tuesday (light blue)

Interviews with students - end of the study Thursday (and R after recess) (grey)

Interview with the teacher - end of the study (navy blue)

Not only did organizing my data in this way allow me to see at a glance what the data source was, but triangulation of data within conceptual categories became almost instantly obvious. It was also easy to move data around, between, and amongst categories; this flexibility was particularly necessary for me at this stage in my analysis. As explained by Merriam (2009),

> the important task is to create an inventory of your entire data set. You need to know exactly what you have in terms of interviews, field notes, documents, memos you wrote while collecting or thinking about your data, and so on. This data set needs to be organized and labelled according

> to some organizing scheme that makes sense to you, the researcher - and a scheme that enables you to access any piece of data at any time. (p. 174)

By the time I had read through and coded the transcriptions of nearly twenty interviews and the first thirty pages of my field notes, I had accumulated five pages of categories and sub-categories which were "predominantly derived from the data themselves" (Tesch, 1990, p. 96). Although I was aware that some overlap had begun to occur within and between categories, I wanted to ensure that I didn't collapse any categories too quickly for fear of losing meaning in the process. Therefore, I continued coding and categorizing all of my data while only very tentatively refining and shaping the categories. In "using the data to think with" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 27), I realized that in organizing my data, I was also engaged in its interpretation (Tesch, 1990, p. 114).

Subsequent rounds of coding: Connection to theory

It has struck me how much it seems I needed to continually 'gear myself up' for each round of data analysis. At times I felt that I was taking a deep breath before going under water again, unaware of when or if I'd be able to come up for air. I wondered if I needed to swim so deeply within each stage of analysis, or if perhaps coming up to exhale and enjoy the view more often might be an equally valuable part of the process. In my study, theory, and Bakhtin's (1984a, 1984b) theory of carnival in particular, provided a brilliant and enlightening horizon each time I surfaced. After I had refined my conceptual categories enough that data seemed to rest somewhat comfortably within each, I turned to Bakhtin's writing on carnival and to the work of current literacy scholars who have incorporated his

theories into their own work (see for example Blackledge & Creese, 2009; Iddings & McCaffery, 2007; Lensmire, 1994; Swaim, 2002) as a lens for systematic analysis of my data. What had begun as a somewhat upbeat dance with my data slowed considerably as I considered my research through this lens. In fact, at times, it seemed that the music stopped entirely as I pondered in silence.

One of the main and ongoing issues I struggled with as I made conscious decisions around the presentation of my data was how wide or narrow the focus of my lens might be. Although this study was designed, with one Grade 2 class as its' case, to examine what Richardson (1997) describes as the collective story of a classroom of children, I was at the same time keenly aware of the individual differences in personalities and experiences of the children who made up this collection of voices. I struggled with how to resolve this tension; with how to introduce these children to my audience in a real and vivid way while at the same time attending to the collective story of which they are a part. Similar to Laurel Richardson's (1997) work, I felt that "although the details of the single [participants'] stories differed, the contours of their experiences were similar" (p. 19). In an attempt to construct the collective story of these children's experiences, like Richardson, I worked to "typify events and sequences of events, illustrating them through multiple voices and direct quotations" (p. 21).

As emphasized by Coffey and Atkinson (1996), I also remained conscious of the levels of generality I was offering in my analysis and in my writing. I selected Bakhtin's theories about carnival as the lens for analysis in my study particularly because his ideas resonated strongly with how I was interpreting my

participants' experiences of animal-assisted literacy learning. However, I was at the same time very conscious that in so doing, I was connecting broad and general theoretical ideas to individual children's experiences. Because an interpretive case study is intended to generate 'knowledge of the particular' and because qualitative research is quite wary of the use of the term 'generalizability,' I was aware that I needed to address how and why I handled issues of generalization within my own writing. When generalizations are offered in the form of themes in my writing, I am generalizing within the sample and not beyond it.

Sifting for gold...

In this stage of analysis, I identified four aspects of Bakhtin's theory, which surfaced on multiple occasions as I worked with my data. These four identifying aspects allowed me to articulate how the children in my study seemed to experience these animal-assisted literacy sessions, and what the significance of these sessions may have been for them. I systematically scanned my coded data for each of the four themes and in so doing, felt much like I was sifting for gold. Each theme served to illuminate key aspects of my coded data and assisted me in asking questions around relationships between each. I kept a separate file for each of the four themes, and as I read and re-read my coded data multiple times, I transferred data into each file. It was exceedingly difficult to attempt to isolate and separate data into 'themes.' Life is messy, and data rarely fit into only one category. I read and re-read these four documents repeatedly, and re-organized the data within each to highlight key aspects of and relationships within each theme.

These documents guided my writing within and between each theme as I crafted the paper *Animal-assisted literacy learning as carnival: A Bakhtinian analysis.*

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CHAPTER 5:

Animal-Assisted Literacy Learning as Carnival: A Bakhtinian Analysis[18]

Background and significance of the study

Millions of children in North America continue to struggle with reading (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). In response, animal-assisted literacy programs, which involve a child reading aloud with a trained 'therapy' dog and a volunteer mentor on a regular basis, have become increasingly popular. Such programs have been established in 4 Canadian provinces, 43 U.S. states, and in Australia, the U.K., Italy, and India (Land of PureGold Foundation, 2011). Despite the global media attention animal-assisted programs have enjoyed, little research has explored the potential benefits and concrete practicalities of these programs for literacy learners in classrooms (Friesen, 2009a).

[18] A version of this chapter has been accepted for publication in the *International Journal of Learning.*

The present study examined the literacy learning experiences of grade 2 children who interacted with a therapy dog and an adult mentor in their classroom. The research questions were: How do children experience literacy learning with a therapy dog and mentor? What significance does animal-assisted learning experiences have for these children? This study is informed by two areas of contemporary research: studies examining school-based mentoring programs and cross-disciplinary research exploring the human-animal bond (HAB) with children in school and therapeutic settings (special-needs education, psychology, and counselling). Within the complex sociocultural classroom context, I sought to explore how children's interactions with a dog would influence literacy mentoring sessions.

There is a growing awareness in contemporary literacy research that schools need to take a preventative rather than a remedial approach to addressing reading difficulties (Moore & Whitfield, 2009). School-based mentoring programs with a focus on the development of a caring relationship between an adult and child while providing reading support have demonstrated social, emotional, and academic benefits for children (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2006; Randolph & Johnson, 2008; Rhodes, 2002). Concomitantly, research exploring the HAB in classrooms suggests that interaction with dogs can improve children's general attitudes towards school by modeling unconditional acceptance and trust (Anderson & Olsen, 2006) and encouraging positive student/teacher interaction (Esteves & Stokes, 2008). Physical touch, such as when a child strokes a dog, can assist in creating an atmosphere of warmth (Prothmann, Bienert, & Ettrich, 2006). Like research on the remedial approach to reading instruction, HAB research has examined the benefits for children identified to have social, emotional, or academic deficits. With an emphasis on the prevention of reading difficulties, as opposed to the remediation of them, the current animal-assisted literacy mentoring program may provide timely and valuable

support for young learners. Animal-assisted literacy mentor programs may provide a unique form of support for children's literacy outside of the complications and expectations of school and family life (Jalongo, Astorino, & Bomboy, 2004). Indeed, the global popularity of animal-assisted literacy programs bolsters an acknowledged tension between the supports that children are currently receiving in classrooms and the kinds of assistance they might need or want (Friesen, 2010, 2009a, 2009b; Jalongo, 2005). This study will assist researchers, policy makers, teachers, and parents to develop alternative, effective literacy experiences for elementary school children.

The research context

This research is a case study of the students in one Grade 2 classroom in a public elementary school in Northern Alberta. Over the course of ten weeks (October until December) during the 2009-2010 school year, I visited the classroom on Tuesday and Thursday mornings each week with my trained therapy dogs, two non-shedding Maltese-poodles named Tango and Sparky. Each week, the students were invited to sign up for one paired 20 minute literacy session with myself and with one of the dogs of their choice. During these sessions, my role was that of a researcher and literacy mentor, attending carefully to the quality of the relationship between the child, the dog, and myself, as well as on nurturing emerging literacy skills (Ellis, Small-McGinley, & de Fabrizio, 2001). These literacy sessions were held in a partitioned section of the classroom (made possible with a folding privacy screen) during regular language arts periods. For these sessions, I provided a soft blanket and several cushions for the students and me to sit on, along with a dog bed. I offered a wide range of children's literature for the students to choose from, should they elect to read during our

session. The children were also invited to bring their own books to our sessions. The students chose whether they wanted to read or write during these sessions, and chose the reading material and/or the topic for their writing. The sessions concluded with the students choosing a sticker which read "I read (or wrote) with Tango (or Sparky) today!" or a gold paw stamp on their hand,[19] and five weeks into the study, by giving the dog a treat in exchange for the dog shaking a paw.

Establishing a climate of trust and safety

When bringing any live animal into a classroom of young children, the establishment of clear routines is essential to ensure the safety and well-being of all participants, including the animals themselves. The selected classroom was one in which the school, the teacher and the children's parents were receptive to dogs and which I had pre-screened for allergies or fear of the participating animals. A common concern of animal-assisted programs involves safety for the children (Friesen, 2009a). To ensure that the students interacted with the dogs in a safe and caring way throughout the study, I arranged to come into the classroom for two afternoons at the beginning of the study to teach the children about how to meet a new dog, and about how a dog's needs are similar and different to our own. An integral part of these lessons was the students' active participation regarding how we

[19] My hope was that these stickers might encourage at-home conversations about the children's animal-assisted literacy learning sessions. However, instead, the stickers typically found their way into students' sticker books or were pasted onto the tops of their desks, chairs, or backpacks.

might set up this learning environment so that all participants (including the dogs) would feel safe and comfortable.

In addition to human ethics approval, animal ethics approval minimized the possibility that the animals would experience stress during their time in the classroom. Special considerations included limiting the amount of interaction time with children to one hour per morning per dog, and allowing only one dog to interact with the children at a time. A specially designed and enclosed 'dog stroller' was used for entering and leaving the school. This stroller was popular in its novelty with the staff and students and served the practical function of ensuring that the dogs would have a private space for rest whenever it was required. Using the stroller also allowed me to keep the dogs with me in a confined but comfortable way whenever I needed to visit other areas of the school, and made practical aspects of transporting piles of books, recording equipment, etc., manageable. Other considerations included ensuring that the children washed their hands using a no-soap sanitizer both before and after contact with the dog during each session, and under no circumstances was an animal left unsupervised when interacting with a child.

Data collection

As a researcher and literacy mentor, I was particularly interested in exploring how the children experienced literacy learning with a therapy dog, and what the significance of these experiences might be for them. I turned to the following data collection tools to assist me in answering my research questions:

- *Audio and video-taping of literacy sessions* - A total of 30 hours of video-taped small-group literacy sessions were recorded over ten weeks. These digitally recorded videos were then reviewed following each morning in the classroom,

and contributed to sets of field notes to track emerging themes, questions, apparent contradictions, and surprises.

- *Observations and field notes* - In addition to the observations gleaned from the literacy session videos, field notes were taken while in the classroom both before and after the scheduled sessions, as well as during bi-weekly researcher classroom visits during language arts periods without the dogs.
- *Interviews* - All 18 children in the class participated in individual and/or small-group audio-taped interviews at three times during the study. The classroom teacher was interviewed at the beginning, mid-way through, and towards the end of the study. Eleven of the parents of the students in the classroom were also interviewed during the last week of the study. In total, 37 interviews informed this study, all of which were transcribed and coded for emerging themes.
- *Student literacy artifacts* - All 18 students participated in pre-interview activities at three times during the study which, as defined by Ellis (2006), assist in facilitating 'getting-to-know-you' conversations while also allowing the child to teach the researcher about the research topic. Prior to the beginning of the study, the students designed 'All About Me' t-shirt posters. Mid-way through the study, the students were invited to write letters to the dog(s) of their choice, and at the end, the students designed posters to illustrate how they experienced literacy learning with the dogs at the beginning, middle, and end of the study. These artifacts were analyzed for themes and patterns, and served to inform subsequent interview questions.
- *The critical friend* - Finally, to assist in the triangulation of data, a ‘critical friend’ (Costa & Kallick, 1993), a PhD colleague, periodically reviewed and provided

feedback on video-taped data to assist me in becoming more sharply self-evaluative (Perkins, 1991).

Towards the end of the study, all data were coded inductively for emerging themes, and generalizations offered in this article are grounded in my perception and interpretation of "situated knowledge, contextualized knowledge, and embodied knowledge" (Ellis, 1998, p. 8) of the research context.

Bakhtin's carnival

Bakhtin's insightful articulation of the distinguishing features and importance of carnivals for its participants during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance provided an intriguing lens for analysis of this study. Bakhtin defines carnival as "the sum total of all diverse festivals, rituals, and forms of a carnival type" (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 122), which he views as unconventional yet essential social contexts (Lensmire, 1994). Far from being simply a trivial and peripheral social activity, Bakhtin emphasizes that carnival served as the impetus for societal change and, characterized by freedom, equality, and possibility, functioned as a necessary source of renewal for the people who lived with official daily restrictions of social hierarchy (Blackledge & Creese, 2009; Iddings & McCaffery, 2007; Swain, 2002). In fact, large medieval cities dedicated several months each year to carnival activities (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 13).

Many of Bakhtin's observations of carnival strongly resonate with what I saw in the children's experiences of animal-assisted literacy learning in this study. Specifically, I consider four aspects of carnival: carnival as an "escape from the usual official way of life" for all people (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 8), that carnival implies a "playful, familiar relation to the world" (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 380), that "free and familiar contact among people" (and in fact animals) during carnival allows for a "new mode of interrelationship between individuals" (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 123), and finally, the duality of carnival as a regenerative and transformative influence characterized by grotesque realism. Bakhtin's

ideas about carnival serve to illuminate the meaning and significance of animal-assisted literacy learning for the children in this study specifically and for considering the classroom literacy-learning context generally.

First, in its celebration of a temporary release from the official social order, carnival offers an inventive second world "outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less" (Bakthin, 1984a, p. 6). In sharp contrast to the monotony and seriousness of everyday life, the atmosphere during carnival is transformed to allow for a playful, creative, spontaneous and lighthearted connection with the world (Toohey, Waterstone, & Lemke, 2000), which in turn opens space for a unique freedom of imagination. During carnival, "a free and familiar attitude spreads over everything: over all values, thoughts, phenomena, and things" (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 123), and in so doing, has a unifying effect.

Carnival provides freedom from all that is commonly accepted and offers opportunities for its participants to experience a new point of view of the world as they enter into an inverted social space where "all [are] considered equal" (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 10). Bakhtin observes that "what is suspended first is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it, that is everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age)" (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 123).

In addition to this suspension of social hierarchy, opportunities for laughter, playfulness, and a temporary right to folly are embodied in the spirit of carnival. Carnival "acquire[s] a general tone of laughter" (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 17), as participants relish in its creative freedoms. Bakhtin (1984a) urges us to bring "the echoes of carnival laughter within the walls of monasteries, universities, and schools" (p. 14) in celebration of the universal and regenerative spirit of carnival. But carnival not only unifies in spirit; it

temporarily suspends physical distance between individuals as participants jostle together in the town square. This brief suspension of distance between people allows for a unique form of communication not possible in daily life.

As individuals are caught up in the irresistible spirit of carnival, in its opportunities for social and attitudinal change, possibilities for transformation and regeneration emerge. Change, as is characterized by the Renaissance, is a key element of carnival. As emphasized by Swaim (2002), "in response to the oppressive quality of everyday life and traditional authority, carnival invites a strong anti-official reaction, called 'carnival abuse' or 'profanation'" (p. 339). This language, common in the market place, is often associated with "the language of the bowels and the phallus" (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 317). Profanation, or *grotesque realism*, is at the same time destructive and regenerative: embraced by the people in the town square as they relish in the shouting of curses, obscenities, tricks, slang, and jokes, it also represents individuals' temporary freedom to express themselves in resistance to authority. As noted by Lensmire (1994), "profanation has as its target the system of practices and ideas that oppress the people" (p. 375) rather than being focused towards individuals themselves.

These four aspects of carnival were all present in my work with the children in this animal-assisted literacy learning program. However, grotesque realism did not feature strongly in this study. While many of the children's literature choices and general attitudes towards literacy reflected a subtle and tentative resistance to what one might call 'typical' school practices, their behaviours are in no means representative of the boisterous mannerisms typical during Bakhtin's carnival, nor would I expect to find overt grotesque realism in the classroom context. However, it is crucial to note that the transformative influences of this program for these children may be closely tied to the attitudes and freedoms behind their many subtle resistances to authority.

Finally**,** closely aligned with the concept of carnival as an escape from the official way of life is the idea of *implied anticipation.* Many scholars (Blackledge & Creese, 2009; Iddings & McCaffery, 2007; Swain, 2002), and Bakhtin himself (1984a, 1984b), have written about carnival as being a largely positive experience for its participants due to the regenerative spirit that accompanies participation. However, one aspect of carnival that seems to be overlooked in the literature is a strongly implied positive anticipation of carnival. Bakhtin holds up carnival as a joyful, temporary release from the typical seriousness of everyday life and from the repression of social order. He specifies that it is this break from routine, from the regular rules that guide life outside of carnival that is so tantalizing for the people. I wonder how many individuals' thoughts lingered about their participation in carnival long after the event took place, and how their experiences of carnival enhanced anticipation for the next event. For the children in this study, both the anticipation and lingering thoughts of these animal-assisted literacy sessions speaks to the importance that these carnivalistic events held for them.

Participation of all and an anticipated escape from regular classroom life

In this classroom, all of the children volunteered to participate in literacy learning sessions with the dogs, and the sessions seemed to serve as an anticipated break from their regular school routine.[20] In fact, one of the largest surprises for me throughout the course of this study was the consistent participation of every student in the class, every week, for ten weeks. Each week, usually on Friday, the teacher would draw student names out of a basket for sign-up on a schedule for a literacy learning session with Tango

[20] Although the children did seem to view these animal-assisted literacy sessions as an anticipated escape from routine, this does not, on the flip side, mean that they dreaded their regular school experience or that they seemed dissatisfied with their teacher. Quite the contrary; Michelle is a much-loved teacher, and her students displayed a great deal of affection for her. I mean only that the students anticipated these experiences as one might an actual carnival event; as much as we desire breaks from routine, we generally return to 'life as normal' once again, but with a regenerative spirit having had the experience.

or Sparky and me. When their name was drawn, each student had a choice: Tuesday or Thursday, Tango or Sparky, or "no thank you!" The children were consistently reminded by both the teacher and by myself that they did not need to sign up if they did not want to. Yet not only did every child sign up each week, but many began strategically planning their schedules around their session in anticipation of it. For example, both Abigail and Samantha came up to me on separate mornings and in high pitched, excited voices, informed me of their plan to read to their chosen dog "on Tuesday because it's my birthday!" On another morning, Ashley came up and announced: "Guess what? On Thursday I get to go to a hockey game AND I get to be with Sparky!" (Fieldnotes, p. 24). On two separate occasions, when Nathan and Samantha realized that they had a doctor's appointment during their scheduled time, the students each worked to switch their time with another student so that they could still have their session. Further, one morning we arrived at the school at the same time as Nathan and his mom, and we talked about how excited Nathan was because their family was leaving for Mexico the next day. Nathan beamed and said, "Yeah, that's why I signed up to be with Tango *today*" (Field notes, p. 44). Later, in Nathan's mom's interview, she emphasized that her son looked forward to reading and writing with the dogs so much that when "he figured out that he might miss Tango and Sparky's visit, he didn't want to go to Mexico" (Interview, 16(2)-12-09).

The children spoke enthusiastically about the novelty of having a dog in the classroom, and seemed to revel in the idea of being privileged, or special, because theirs was the only class that got time with Tango and Sparky. The carnivalesque draw of the dogs seemed most prevalent during recess, when a line of children (both from this classroom and others) would be pressed up against the school fence, waving and calling out to Tango and Sparky as they went on their recess break walk:

Lori: What do you like the most about [reading and writing with the dogs]?

Matthew: That no other classrooms get to read and write with them.

Lori: So do other kids say stuff to you about it? (He nods) What do they say?

Matthew: Well sometimes they go to that post over there (he points to the field where I walk the dogs during recess time), some other kids come who aren't in our class, and they're like how come there are dogs walking in the field there? And I say we can read or write with them and they get all, they get mad, and sometimes they say, "How come I don't get to read and write with dogs?" (Interview 26-11- 09)

The students' consistent and purposeful participation, or the 'participation of all' characteristic of carnival, seemed to be in part because literacy learning with the dogs offered a break from typical school life in grade 2. This escape from routine can be observed in the general tone of excitement displayed in students' letter writing to the dogs, in comments such as "I am jumping for joy because I am so excited about reading with you!" and in their actions surrounding their participation in literacy sessions with the dogs and me. When I asked students in conversation about what was new and exciting, Michael's response "Tango and Sparky are new and exciting" (Fieldnotes, p. 65) captures the overall feeling of enthusiasm generated by having the dogs in the classroom. Tuesdays and Thursdays as 'fun days' featured in students' comments, and was demonstrated during their sessions:

> Samantha is so excited to read to Tango that she can hardly stand it - hands clasped, bouncing up and down. Then she says: "I wanna come, I wanna come here for an hour. I'm gonna read with him, and there should be a dog over here and a dog over here!" (she motions petting one on each side). (Fieldnotes, p. 36)

The students' parents spoke specifically about how their child's "favourite part has been a break from structure" (Interview 16(3)-12-09), and the children having something special to look forward to featured strongly in conversations with the classroom teacher and with the parents of these students, as well as with the students themselves. When I asked the teacher if there were students in particular whom she felt looked forward to their sessions with the dogs and me, she responded "Gosh, but that's like everybody." Michelle then went on to explain: "Because you're only coming twice a week, they look forward to those two days, and it's for, you know, three periods in the morning, so it's not like we're being bombarded by them, so it's a special event that they look forward to" (Interview 15-12-09).

The parents not only spoke about Tuesday and Thursday being their child's favourite days of the school week for the duration of the program, but 'Tango and Sparky days' seemed to serve as an inspiration for their children to go to school:

> It's something to look forward to, because we would always say to him, what's your favourite day of the week? Well I like Tuesdays because we do the dogs and then he said Wednesdays because it's computers and all the fun stuff, gym, and then Thursdays he said, he likes Thursdays because of the dogs. But that's the only thing he ever says [about school]. Because then they have that *thing* to look forward to, right? Cos if there's something to look forward to, then they want to go [to school]. And they *want* to be there and they *want* to do it and they want to learn. (Interview 16(5)-12-09)

The full and active participation characteristic of carnival, along with an anticipated break from the regular classroom routine is illustrated in these children's comments around the novelty and their enjoyment of having a dog in their classroom. Part of the significance of animal-assisted literacy sessions for these children seems to be in having something special to look forward to at school. Part of the enchantment of carnival lies in the temporary suspension of all that is official; as described by one parent, these animal-assisted literacy sessions were "just magical for [the students], they just think it's magic" (Interview 16(4)-12-09).

A carnival sense of the world as a playful, familiar relation to the world

Similar to the "suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 10) experienced during carnival, these animal-assisted literacy sessions are spaces where the child and adult are released from traditional roles of learner and teacher. Instead, like Lensmire's (1994) observation of writer's workshop, the adult is "*among children*, rather than in the front of the room" (p. 378). I made a conscious decision early on in the study to be a playful participant during these sessions, and I worked to consistently honour and support the students' literacy decisions and ideas. Further, the children came to these sessions as 'equal' participants. Regardless of their reading and writing abilities or the level they were working at in guided reading groups

(Fountas & Pinnell, 2001)[21], all were offered the same choices: of whether or not to sign up each week, which day of the week, and which dog they wanted to work with. Once they arrived at the session, their choices again were the same: whether to read or write, which book to read or which topic to write about, who wanted to read first, if they would read one/two pages each or choral read, and (not always consciously), how they would like the dog to participate.

Among the many choices that the children had, it is perhaps this last element that most encouraged the sense of playfulness, laughter, imagination, and a temporary right to folly enjoyed during carnival. In contrast with the seriousness often associated with classroom reading and writing activities, our sessions acquired a 'general tone of laughter' as the children and I involved the dog as a playful participant during our literacy sessions. With the characteristically joyful exuberance of six year olds, the children would ask the dog comprehension questions during our sessions, for example, to see if the dog understood the joke we had just read, or to find out if the dog could predict what was going to happen next in the story. Often, the children leaned in to see what the dog would 'say' or would answer for the dog, which resulted in a sea of giggles from the group when the dog would sleepily lift her head and yawn or wag her tail in response. The following excerpt is taken from a session with two students reading *Snowmen at Night*:

Nathan: There's purple snow. Hey did you know that snowmen's pee is purple?

Lori: Really? Maybe someone just dropped a grape sucker.

Abigail: Tango, did someone drop a grape sucker?

So I show Tango the grape sucker snow picture – both Nathan and Abigail lean in to see if she looks. Then Nathan leans in and says to Tango:

Nathan: See the grape sucker?

[21] The children were very conscious of the guided reading levels of their classmates, and commonly spoke of their reading in terms of which level they were at.

Abigail: Tango's like, oooh, yummy!

Nathan: Tango doesn't like to be outside, does she?

Lori: No, not right now, it's too cold.

Then Abigail puts Tango's toy in her bed with her and leans down to kiss her.

(Fieldnotes, p. 79)

The way that many of the children imaginatively and playfully involved the dog in literacy activities seemed to contribute to a light-hearted atmosphere for learning. The students and I paused periodically to show the dog the pictures in the story we were reading, and would sometimes physically involve the dog[22], such as when Daniel noticed the similarities between the main character of *Walter the Farting Dog* and Sparky:

> Daniel says: "Sparky looks like him!" and then moves Sparky's ears like he's flying, like Walter when he's floating from too much gas. Then the boys ask Sparky: "Can you fly?" – Isabella is giggling quietly during this interaction. Daniel announces: "I have a beagle and he looks like Under Dog." "My dad makes him look like he's flying." Then, as Daniel finishes reading his page he says to Sparky, "Can you fly like that?" (Fieldnotes, p. 46)

[22] By 'physically involve the dog,' I mean that the children and I would often involve the dog by playfully incorporating him or her into our learning. For example, Tango would sometimes 'hold' the rough draft of the students' writing (we would lay it across her belly), Tango would give a student a 'high five' for learning a new word, or we would physically shift our seated positions "so that Sparky could see the book too" (Fieldnotes, p. 17). Other times, the dog seemed to involve himself in the activities, such as when Sparky "held the book open" by plopping his head right in the middle of the book, followed by an eruption of smiles and giggles from the students (Fieldnotes, p. 18). When reading, some children would put their head right beside the dog's head and point to the book "to show [Sparky] where a word is in the book" (Fieldnotes, p. 84).

This sense of playfulness and imagination during our sessions seemed to open space for the dog to serve as a mediator for purposeful literacy learning. For example, when the students were writing stories, I would ask them if they would like to read what they'd written so far to the dog, a live audience. Reading to the dog seemed to inspire the children to read their writing aloud, which allowed me to help the students in shaping and expanding upon their ideas. If a child was struggling with decoding a word, I asked Tango if she knew that word and if maybe we could learn it together. If a child seemed to be unsure of the meaning of new vocabulary, I would explain the meaning of the word to Tango rather than directly to the students, and if the child recalled the word later on in the story, I would ask Tango to 'give her a high five.' In fact, for the students who struggled with reading in the class, parents noted that their child's favourite part was "being able to be smarter than the dog" (Interview 16(3)-12-09). In the photo above, reading has been transformed into a playful, light-hearted endeavour as we try to teach Sparky a new word.

The suspension of social hierarchy and consequent possibility of judgment within the 'second world' of these sessions was emphasized by the students themselves, as well as by their parents and by the classroom teacher. Many of the parents stressed that when their children were reading with the dogs, they could be themselves and were free to make mistakes in an unconditional, comforting setting. This non-judgmental space may be particularly important for children with developmental challenges. As noted by one parent, "I think reading to the dogs is a safe setting, there's no embarrassment there for

her, if she makes an error or whatever, and they're not going to judge if she stutters" (Interview 16(10)-12-09). However, reading aloud without interference from an adult was a prevalent theme, even from very capable readers, as is illustrated in this interview with Jessica and her mom:

Lori: So do you think that your daughter perceives reading to an adult differently than reading to a dog?

Mom: I don't think that she would do anything different -

Jessica: Yeah!

Mom: You do see it differently? How?

Jessica: Because they don't even help me on words.

Mom: Oh, when you're stuck?

Jessica: Yeah... I like that. Because sometimes she (gesturing to her mom) reads with me and I don't like it.

Mom: I'll say the word before she's ready. Right? So the dogs give you a chance to sound it out, or maybe just try to figure out a word that it could be?

Jessica: Yeah.

Mom: And then she'll go Mom, if I look at you, I need help on the word but just, you know, let me try to figure it out. You're right, I'm guilty! (Interview 16(8)-12-09)

Later on in the interview, Jessica's mom suggested that Jessica try reading to their dogs at home, which inspired an audible gasp of excitement and a flurry of plans from her daughter for that evening's reading. Despite how her mother defended herself in that she was trying "to be quiet now and let [her] figure out the words," Jessica responded, "I know, but I'm reading with [the dogs] tonight" (Interview 16(8)-12-09). In fact, one of the other large surprises of this study for me was that in addition to Jessica, one third of the children in the class began engaging in literacy activities at home with their own pets

during the course of the study. Children (in their interviews and during animal-assisted literacy sessions) and their parents (during the interviews) shared stories about reading their family pets a night-time story, writing their own stories and drawing pictures with their pets, and engaging in lively conversations with their pets. The classroom teacher admitted that she too used to teach her own pets, and would share this information with the children who came to her and told her, "Oh you know what, I've read a story to my dog and I teach my dog what we're learning at school and when I do my homework I do it with my dog or my cat" (Interview 15-12-09).

The children's engagement in literacy activities with their own pets is closely tied to what many of the children seemed to believe about the dogs in general. Because I was a full participant during our literacy sessions, when I asked the children about what our 'jobs' were during these sessions, I was surprised when the students described my role somewhat mechanically, as a helper with words they don't know when reading and writing, and as someone who takes care of the dogs. In fact, one parent shared with me (somewhat apologetically) that although her son talked about the dogs at home, he rarely mentioned me (Interview 16(3)-12-09). However, when asked about the dog's role, the children clearly stated that the dog's job was to listen and pay attention to their stories, to make sure that they're concentrating, to "make us happy and inspire us to read" (Interview 03-12-09), and to help them by letting them cuddle with them:

Amanda: I think [the dogs] are there to snuggle with and help us.

Lori: Yeah? How do you think they help you?

Amanda: Well, see, you remember when I had a sore headache? She really helped me.

Lori: How did she help you?

Amanda: She was all snuggling up and kissing and all that.

Lori: Oh, and it made you feel better?

Amanda: Yeah. (Interview 05-11-09)

While offering a playful, imaginative space for literacy learning, these animal-assisted literacy sessions also allowed opportunities for the students to cuddle with the dogs, to be close to someone. As I will illustrate in the next section, the 'free and familiar contact' characteristic of this carnivalesque environment seemed to open spaces for new forms of interrelationship not common in the typical classroom context.

Free and familiar contact allows for new modes of interrelationship

During carnival, "all distance between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: free and familiar contact among people" (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 123). This temporary suspension of barriers allows for a "special type of communication impossible in everyday life" (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 10). These animal-assisted literacy learning sessions temporarily brought together students who otherwise might be divided by reading levels, socially by cliques, or physically by rows of desks. Instead, in the students' words, these small groups offered a familial form of support for their learning:

Lori: Ok. So you don't like guided reading, but you do like coming back here?

Ashley: Yeah.

Lori: So how is this different?

Ashley: Well cos I get to be with...cos I get to be with my friends. I get to be like really close to them.

Lori: Ok...

Ashley: I'm with my friends out there [gesturing to the rest of the classroom] but I'm just like, far away from them. But back here, I feel like we're, like...it feels like we're a family. (Interview 05-11-09)

For many of these children, the sessions seemed to contribute to feelings of comfort and companionship through the close physical contact they allowed, both with friends and with the dogs. As described by this mother: "It just made him feel so comfortable, you know? To have [the dogs] there...we're such an animal family, he kind of took our home life and used it in school as well because he was just *so* comfortable around them" (Interview 16(2)-12-09). The students spoke about the best part of the sessions being that they got to "cuddle" with the dogs[23], and how reading didn't feel like such a lonely experience, as is illustrated by this interview excerpt with Daniel and Michael:

Lori: Think about other times when you do reading or writing at school or at home. How does reading and writing with Tango, Sparky, and me feel similar or different to that?

Daniel: Oh, it's fun!

Lori: So does it make you feel different?

Daniel: I feel like I'm not lonely.

Michael: Yeah.

Lori: Ok. Do you feel lonely when you're reading on your own sometimes?

Daniel: Sometimes.

Michael: Sometimes, yeah. I like reading back here more. (Interview 19-11-09)

Although I noticed how comfortable the students, the dogs and I seemed to be together, over time I began to understand how the dog served as a *soft social bridge* between us. From the beginning of the study, the students and I had in common that most students had

[23] However, the children were not allowed to pick up the dog or take him/her out of the dog bed to put on their laps.

pets of their own (or wanted them). For the students who didn't have pets, we all had Tango and Sparky in common. Otherwise potentially awkward silences common in new relationships were filled with reaching out to pet the dog, often accompanied by meaningful stories shared about the students' own pets or questions about Tango and Sparky, and served as an intimate space for working out feelings about pet loss. I came to see that it wasn't necessarily what the dog was doing during these sessions, but what the dog represented that seemed to be significant for these children: as a common, constant, and responsive source of comfort and friendship. The parents of these students also spoke about this novel form of relationship not typical in classrooms, that of the dogs as 'little friends' for their children. In a tearful interview, one parent spoke of the social challenges her daughter has experienced: "Socially, I mean, she has friends in the classroom, but as far as a close friendship, that takes time to nurture and kids have to be patient, and they're not necessarily as patient as a dog" (Interview 16(10)-12-09). As explained by another parent, the social competence I had observed in her son was new for him this year: "...the timing was perfect, for the dog program to come in because he had the opportunity - he was making new friends and he had the opportunity to find his own little niche in the class and I think that helped with it." She went on to explain that "because they had [the dogs] in common [they built] friendships based on that" (16(3)-12-09).

It was fascinating to observe the rhythm of physical interaction that featured recurrently during these animal-assisted literacy sessions. While one child was reading, the other child would take an opportunity to pet, touch, hug, or kiss the dog. As Matthew

explained it, his favourite part of reading and writing with the dogs was "when someone is sitting right here and they are reading a page, I get to pet them when they're reading, and then it's my turn" (Interview 26-11-09). This rhythm was obvious with many of the participants from the beginning of the study, and further, this interaction seemed to focus student attention on literacy activities during animal-assisted literacy sessions, particularly for the boys in the class. This observation was perhaps made all the more noticeable due to what seemed to be a sharp contrast between the boys' behaviour during regular class time and their behaviour during our sessions. In contrast to their typical classroom experience, I rarely needed to call the boys' attention back to me or ask for their attention. This observation was also noted by the critical friend in my study when observing a video of one of the sessions:

> [I was struck by] the little boy who focused his attention for an extended period of time, had it drawn away because of the classroom noise and then brought himself back to the reading without any external prompts. (Fieldnotes, 01-03-10)

As Nathan describes it, when he's with the dogs "I feel very calmed down and feel like I want to write" (Interview 03-12-09), while Matthew emphasizes how "we get to sit in peace" (Interview 26-11-09) during these sessions, without the distractions and busyness of the regular classroom.

Although this rhythm of interaction between the children and the dogs was present early on in the study, I observed a clear deepening of the children's affection towards the dog in the form of increased and sustained

touch, hugs, and kisses over time.[24] An action I termed 'the bow,' in which the children would lean right down to put their heads close to the dog's head and body, became prevalent in our sessions. This increased display of physical affection towards the dogs coincided with the fifth week of the study and was sustained for the remainder of the study, when the children were invited to write letters to the dogs, and when 'the dogs' wrote back to them.[25]

Carnival as a transformative influence, characterized by grotesque realism

In the final section of this article, in which I attend to the potential transformative and anti-official influence of carnivalesque experiences, I feature the voices of the parents and teacher in suggesting how meaningful literacy experiences such as writing to the dogs contributed to positive associations with literacy for these students in the broader school and home context. Just as "the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven" (Bakhtin, 1986a, p. 317), participation in carnival represents a duality between regeneration/transformation and destruction. While participants relish a temporary, regenerative freedom from authority during carnival, their participation invites the use of anti-official language, or what Bakhtin refers to as *grotesque realism*. This language of the market place often "employs blasphemies, obscenities, and strident parodies" (Swaim, 2002, p. 339). Although the language of grotesque realism did not feature prominently with the students in this study (nor would it be expected or even allowed in the classroom), the second world of these sessions invited subtle underlying resistances to typical school practices, and may be closely connected to the carnivalesque

[24] The children's deepening of care for the dogs over time was also demonstrated in the heart-filled poems, songs, stories, and notes that some of the students wrote for the dogs.

[25] Writing letters to and from the dogs took on a tone similar to that of writing letters to and from Santa Claus. While there existed a range of belief among the children about the dogs' abilities to actually read and write, the playfulness, lightheartedness and imaginative possibilities it invited seemed to contribute to the students' enthusiasm and curiosity about writing to this unique audience.

"transforming influence" (Bakhtin, 1986b, p. 107) these literacy experiences had for them.

The transforming influence of "a carnival sense of the world" seemed to trickle into the children's broader school and at-home literacy experiences. Their literacy learning sessions with Tango and Sparky inspired positive at-home conversations about literacy in particular, and positive, purposeful literacy learning at school in general. According to Anthony's mother, "that's the first thing he talks about [when he gets home from school] is Mom, I got to read to Sparky, I got to read to Tango" (Interview 16(4)-12-09). Isabella's mother mentioned that her daughter "always had a story to tell, always had something to say" about literacy learning with the dogs:

> She has always loved reading and writing, but... it affected her positively in her desire to make sure that she was at school to include [the dogs] in her writing, right, and in her thoughts, and I mean at our dinner table what we do is what is the best part of your day and what is the worst part and what is the funniest, and she doesn't actually love doing that but you know on a Thursday she'll be like "Oh I got to read to Tango or Sparky today"... It absolutely affected her in a positive way, she loved it even a little more. (Interview 16(6)-12-09)

Other parents spoke about how they wouldn't hear about it if their child was 'simply silent reading' at school but that they would often hear about the books their children were reading to the dogs. Although there is no way to know if there is a correlation between what seemed to be an underlying increased positive association and confidence towards reading and writing and the children's participation in this program, many of the parents spoke about how their children seemed to embrace reading more at home this year as demonstrated by an increase in at-home child-initiated reading, combined with enthusiastic talk about the dogs. At school, the teacher spoke about the children's

participation in these sessions as "accelerating what I was already teaching in reading and writing" in providing a meaningful audience for the students' writing:

> [The students] are writing for a purpose. Their writing the letters to Tango and Sparky made it more special for them, it's like an audience for them. And when I tell them that they'll be reading something to Tango and Sparky it makes it more meaningful for them, and I think the *level* of writing and reading has probably increased, because it's so much more - they just take it more seriously. (Interview 15-12-09)

The parents spoke about the letters that the children received back from 'the dogs' holding special significance for the children as well:

> I have four kids so I'm not going to lie to you, I throw out everything because I don't have room for any more stuff, but she wouldn't let me. It's sitting up on her dresser. I'm not allowed to touch that, that's her special letter. (Interview 16(6)-12-09)

Participation in meaningful reading and writing experiences with the dogs and me seems to have had a transforming influence with regard to many of the children's perceptions of reading and writing as purposeful and enjoyable, which in turn may have influenced their at-home literacy practices. However, the transformative influence of carnivalesque experiences may be closely tied to the anti-official spirit inspired by the students' participation in these events. The language that would hint at grotesque realism was invited by the types of children's literature chosen by the children, and was discreetly present in the students' speech and writing. Further, subtle - but not to be mistaken for insignificant - resistances to regular classroom practices were demonstrated in the

students' actions and attitudes as they participated in these animal-assisted literacy sessions.

First, this space invited forays into Grade 2 children's general fascination with 'butts and farts.' Despite the wide range of literature offered to the children each week, including fiction and non-fiction titles and a range of genres (including but not limited to children's poetry and instructional drawing books)[26], the students were typically drawn to books in the *Walter the Farting Dog* series, joke books, and books with animals as main characters who themselves resist authority, such as Melanie Watt's *Chester* and Linda Bailey's *Stanley's Party*. Collectively, most of these books (except perhaps the last two) are not commonly read in classrooms, but as indicated by the children, were owned by the students at home. As is illustrated by Michael's comment, "they make different books back here" it seemed that part of the draw of this second world in the classroom was the escape from typical books read within regular classroom life. Using words like 'fart' and 'flatulence' in the classroom caused children to look over their shoulders and giggle as they engaged in this subtle carnivalesque behaviour.

The students' fascination with butts and farts was not limited to their literature selections; it also featured in their conversations and in their writing, particularly with the boys in the class. Participation in writer's workshop, which the teacher held on a regular basis, meant that students in this classroom enjoyed relative freedom in regard to their choice of topic and genre, and students pushed the boundaries of this freedom within this space. For example, as Abigail and Nathan brainstormed ideas for their story "Ten Ways to Scare a Monster," Nathan suggested that they write "Slap him on the butt!" I warned him that his teacher probably wouldn't like that - but he simply shrugged and indicated that he didn't want to change it (Fieldnotes, p. 46). When the students were invited to

[26] Although a range of levels were offered, most of the books were picture-book length so that groups could read the entire book during one sitting if desired.

write letters to the dogs and me, Matthew took the opportunity to ask, in his very first sentence: "Is it true that dogs like to sniff each other's butts?" (Fieldnotes, p. 37). For many other children, this might have been a genuine inquiry, but the mischievous smile spreading across this otherwise very shy child's face when I addressed his question in conversation spoke volumes about his intentions. It was subtle, but unmistakable: he revelled in the small freedom this writing about the dog had afforded him.

Finally, although discreet, a clear anti-official spirit surfaced in the students temporary release from another aspect of regular classroom practices: participation in these sessions meant that they got to ignore the teacher. Privileging our sessions above the regular classroom routines and expectations was not pre-determined, it was just something the students did and was tolerated by the teacher. Not mean-spirited or directed at their teacher, this anti-official reaction, instead, seemed to "target the system of practices and ideas" (Lensmire, 1994, p. 375) usually imposed on the students:

> As we're reading, the teacher calls for Sarah to get her the guided reading bin "K" please. A quiet smile spreads across Sara's face as she looks over at the teacher, but she doesn't move a muscle - she is with the dogs and I and therefore relieved of regular classroom duties. (Fieldnotes, p. 60)

The children's choices of books and writing topics around ‘farts and butts’ and their subtle resistance to authority in ignoring their teacher's requests collectively contributed to an anti-official undercurrent around their participation. Carnival is at once both positive and negative, transformative and destructive; for these children, the transformative significance of their participation in these sessions in the larger school context and at home may be closely tied to the elements of grotesque realism they invited.

Concluding remarks

The anticipation these animal-assisted literacy sessions seemed to inspire for the students, regardless of their literacy ability or their position within the complex social sphere of relationships in the classroom, speaks to the significance these sessions held for them. Along with this, the notion of the dog as a soft social bridge between children who find themselves on the periphery of social groups for a myriad of reasons (i.e., socio-economic, cultural, and/or because of a language barrier) should be explored further in future research. The many ways in which the children in this study seemed to experience animal-assisted literacy sessions as opportunities to engage in imaginative play with reading and writing resonates with what current scholars emphasize about effective literacy learning: that educators should work towards nurturing children's "sense of joy, playfulness, enthusiasm, and intention" towards text (Collins, 2008, p. xv). Further, the omnipresent yet rarely explicitly noticed interaction with the adult/literacy mentor by the participants has intriguing ramifications for the role of the adult as literacy 'mentor' within these programs. Although it is difficult to know if my approach to these animal-assisted literacy sessions influenced the nature of the students' involvement, or vice-versa, contemporary literacy scholars exploring learner participation through the lens of Bakhtin's carnival suggests that the playful participation of an adult may encourage children's participation in learning activities (Toohey, Waterstone, and Lemke, 2000, p. 421), and therefore warrants further research. Finally, although the dog serving as a multi-sensory focus of student attention seemed to be most prevalent with the boys in this study, this observation has likely not been noted in previous research and therefore deserves further examination.

Animal-assisted literacy sessions seemed to offer these children a familial, supportive space to think, to imagine, to play with and to explore language, and to

practice emerging literacy skills in a non-judgemental setting. If so many children continue to struggle to learn to read in North America, attentive consideration of the kinds of texts and experiences that children are choosing to engage in can provide important insight into novel forms of literacy support for young learners.

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CHAPTER 6:

Discussion and Implications for Future Research:

My hope is to nudge the world a little[27]

We need to bring back the pioneer spirit that attracted many of us to the teaching profession. We need to return to following students' leads, thinking on our feet...We need to become advocates for more playfulness, more wide-open spaces, and less-formal courses of study at the elementary level. (Harwayne, 2007, p. 1-2)

The Deep Meaning of Surprises

When I first began doctoral studies this research topic was only a muted dream in my mind, bolstered by the statistical reality of millions of children in North America who continue to struggle with literacy. Like most people with dreams, I spent a good deal of time wondering if it was probable or even possible to build a dissertation around my deep interest in animal-assisted literacy learning with children. The road has not always been easy, but the roller-coaster of emotions

[27] Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988

involved in doctoral studies has been, for me, somewhat smoothed by an unwavering passion for my topic.

There have been many joyful surprises along the way. Feeling much like a detective, over time I uncovered gaps in the research surrounding animal-assisted literacy programs and began to see and then assemble what I came to recognize as my research puzzle. I was surprised when I discovered how many animal-assisted literacy learning programs had been established globally, contrasted with a paucity of research around how children actually experience these programs. I was surprised to learn how the majority of these programs narrowly defined literacy as reading, and that likely no research had been done in North America to better understand why these programs might be beneficial for young learners. Finally, I was surprised by what seemed to be a curious and purposeful lack of attention towards the role that the adult volunteer within these programs might play when mentorship research suggests that school-based mentoring relationships can offer beneficial emotional, social, and academic support for young children. As Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) note, "Surprises can be quite lovely at times - quite useful" (p. 238). I've become increasingly convinced that the more I am surprised, the more I learn.

For me, each of the discoveries I've mentioned above served as a landmark in my thinking and as inspiration for another manuscript, and subsequently another adventure in navigating the world of peer-review and publishing. In the final paper in this dissertation and in answer to the formidable 'So What?' question, I have struggled with deciding on which aspects of my work to

highlight. I have decided to first offer a synopsis of the significance of this study's context and questions, followed by an offering of its potential contribution in relation to broader research conversations. Specifically, couched within the themes presented in Chapter 5, I consider the contribution this research makes to what is known about animal-assisted programs with children in educational contexts (introduced in Chapter 2) and how this study contributes to current research exploring school-based mentoring programs and animal-assisted literacy programs in particular (as was discussed in Chapter 3). Finally, although it is not common practice to introduce new data in the concluding chapter, I do so here to more fully examine not only how this classroom of children experienced animal-assisted literacy learning (as was discussed in Chapters 4 and 5), but to offer a deeper explanation of why these experiences may have been significant to this group of children.

The Significance of the Research Context and Questions

This study was designed in response to a gap in current research on animal-assisted literacy learning programs with children in the elementary school context. In recent years, promising anecdotal reports have suggested that children may enjoy increased reading levels as a result of their participation in animal-assisted literacy programs (see for example Gerben, 2003; Hughes, 2002; Martin, 2001; Newlin, 2003). A recent study out of UC Davis further supports animal-assisted literacy learning through the documentation of significant increases in students' reading fluency when children participated in these sessions once each week over a ten week period (Smith & Meehan, 2010). However, despite the

increasing global popularity of these programs, very little research has explored how participating children experience them or what the significance of these programs may be for young students in the classroom context. Further, as previously noted, the vast majority of animal-assisted literacy programs define 'literacy' almost exclusively as 'reading' (and on reading trade books in particular). In line with current Canadian literacy research, practice, and curriculum (LLRC, 2008), literacy is defined in this study as reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and representing. Using this definition, I hoped to gain a realistic and comprehensive understanding of children's at-school literacy lives. Finally, although animal-assisted literacy programs commonly refer to the participating adult and dog as 'literacy mentor teams' (Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2010), as was discussed in Chapter 2, there is an underlying assumption within these programs that it is the dogs unconditional support which encourages children to participate, with little attention paid to the role of the adult or to the dynamics within these sessions that might uniquely support children in their literacy efforts. By considering the participating adult and dog as a literacy mentor team, this study sought to examine the potential for novel and transformative forms of social, emotional, and academic support for children within these sessions.

Overview of research findings

Through the lens of Bakhtin's carnival, this case study conducted in one grade 2 classroom explored how students experienced an animal-assisted literacy program in their classroom context, and examined what the significance of these experiences were for these children. In Chapter 5, four key themes are discussed:

(1) the participation of all children as an anticipated escape from regular classroom life, (2) animal-assisted literacy learning as playful, familiar experiences steeped in imagination, (3) free and familiar contact as novel and familial modes of interrelationship, and finally, (4) carnivalesque experiences as potentially transformative influences for children's broader school and at-home literacy practices, characterized by subtle elements of grotesque realism. It is my hope that this research will assist researchers, policy makers, teachers, and parents to consider alternative, effective literacy experiences for elementary school children.

So what?

The potential contribution of this study to broader research conversations

1. Full participation and anticipation

As an educator I have always been a careful planner, and therefore, when I first designed this study, I had quite a clear idea in my mind of how I would like the project to go. I now smile at my naivety. When I chose to invite all of the students in the class to participate in the study, I wondered if, for many of the children, the novelty and fun of reading and writing with a dog would wear off. As was discussed in Chapter 3, this idea remained in the back of my mind after I read the R.E.A.D. Team Training Manual (2007), which notes that in the context of animal-assisted library reading programs, this organization has "cut back to four-week programs a couple times per year, or once-a-month sessions" because the program "becomes commonplace and therefore less appreciated" (p. 58).

Further, I am aware that not everyone is an animal lover, and that many children may be fearful of animals or simply not familiar with dogs for a variety of reasons. Finally, as an allergy sufferer myself, I had already accepted that this wouldn't be every child's cup of tea. If the interest level of students dropped off, this would not only serve as an interesting data set (Who chose to stop participating? Why did they choose not to participate?), but would conveniently limit the number of participants for me to focus on.

I was surprised when every child in the class continued to sign up for a literacy session each week. The participation of all people during carnivals of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as described by Bakhtin (1984a, 1984b), is characterized by a joyful escape from the humdrum of official daily life, and this certainly captures the essence of how the students seemed to experience animal-assisted literacy learning sessions in this classroom. The strong theme of anticipation in regard to the students' time with the dogs at school resonates with research exploring animal-assisted programs in the classroom context as introduced in Chapter 2 and specifically, the findings of Anderson and Olson's (2006) study which explored how a dog may affect children's emotional stability and learning in a classroom of 6-to 11-year olds with special needs. Anderson and Olson (2006) articulate that over an eight-week period, the students' attitudes towards school improved as a result of repeated interactions with a dog over time. The parents of these children emphasized how "prior to this study, [my child] did not talk about his time at school and showed no excitement about going to school" (p. 43). These findings align with what some of the participants in my study have

indicated; that it was the dog's calming presence and non-judgmental companionship that seemed, for them, to contribute to increased enthusiasm towards school.

However, the full and consistent voluntary participation of the students in my research study suggests not that every child benefited in the same way, but that every child positively benefited from these animal-assisted learning experiences in their own way - and not only children who, for example, struggled with literacy or who found themselves on the periphery of social, socio-economic or cultural groups. This full participation aligns with what current research exploring school-based mentorship programs suggests: that every child can benefit from regular, positive interactions with a caring non-related adult (Ellis, Small-McGinley, & De Fabrizio, 2001). When I asked the children in this classroom what they liked most about reading and writing with me and with the dogs, the range of responses was a reflection of the varied significance these experiences held for each child. For children who didn't have pets at home, spending time with the dogs and I was an exciting opportunity to be around and learn about animals, as is illustrated by Ashley's comment: "I think it's really fun having Sparky because the only dog I get to see is my Grandma's dog and I really want a dog when I get big". For children who have their own pets at home, which in this classroom represented the majority of the students[28], reading and writing with the dogs was important because they missed their own pets while they were at school. As Jessica explained: "It feels good because I have dogs when I'm at

[28] Of the 18 children in this classroom, 16 had pets, 12 of whom had dogs as pets. Many of these children's families had larger-breed dogs who lived outside of the home for the most part.

home too and I miss them when I'm at school...if I have the dogs here I don't miss them that much". Other children seemed to relish feelings of being privileged or special because theirs was the only class who got to read and write with the dogs, while still others emphasized that the best part of these experiences for them was getting to cuddle with and touch the dogs, and be close to their friends while getting some help (from both myself and from the dogs)[29] during literacy activities. As previously noted, although mild allergies or fear of dogs can often limit some children's exposure to many different kinds of animals, even children who had allergies to animals continued to sign up for these sessions each week, and gained increased confidence, both around the dogs and with regard to their own attitudes towards literacy, as the study progressed.

In fact, the children, their parents, and the teacher attributed gains in the students' literacy at least in part to working with the dogs and me. For example, even though Victoria was a strong reader from the beginning of the study, she explained that "with the dogs it makes me better at reading... cos I feel like I'm cuddling". Emily, a shy child, an animal lover, an avid reader and a strong writer, dedicated an entire section in her writing folder to letters, poems, and songs written to Tango. Another boy who had been struggling in reading and math shared how his Mom told him that "Ever since you went with Tango and Sparky you've been getting a lot better!", while the classroom teacher emphasized that in general, "the level of reading and writing has probably increased, because...who they're writing for is more meaningful; they know that come Thursday or the next

[29]Precisely how the children in this study seemed to view the kinds of support they received from me and from the dogs will be discussed later on in this paper in Section 3.

Tuesday, they're going to be sharing their work with the dogs. So for me to motivate them, it wasn't very hard".

The entire class's enthusiastic ongoing participation, coupled with the broad range of positive benefits associated with their participation in literacy experiences with the dogs and me suggests that organizers of animal-assisted literacy mentoring programs might consider opening up these programs for all children to participate. Similar to the majority of human-only school-based mentorship programs which are geared towards the slightly-at-risk child (Dubois, Holloway, & Cooper, 2002; Randolph & Johnson, 2008), the key benefits of animal-assisted literacy programs are often thought to lie within the support that can be offered to children who are struggling in literacy, and in reading in particular (Friesen, 2010). While the non-judgmental support that dogs can offer children who struggle with and/or who are reluctant to engage in literacy is certainly one aspect of the benefits experienced by these children, this study demonstrates that animal-assisted literacy programs can also offer valuable opportunities for children to gain confidence in literacy while gaining confidence in being around dogs, can offset feelings of loneliness for their own pets while children are at school, can contribute to feelings of comfort through close physical contact both with the dog and with their friends, and can positively influence students' subsequent association with literacy outside of these sessions through their engagement in related, meaningful literacy activities in the classroom (and, as will be discussed later on, at home as well). The wide range of benefits experienced by children of diverse abilities (and their perceived abilities in

literacy) in this classroom suggests that animal-assisted mentoring programs can provide valuable academic, social, and emotional support for young learners.

Considering the strong theme of anticipation prevalent in this study, educators might consider other carnivalesque possibilities within classroom, school, and community contexts and attempt to build in temporary escapes from typical school life for their students. Future studies might explore how looking forward to and participating in carnivalesque activities influences children's literacy learning in particular and their overall school experience in general. For example, research seeking to understand how students experience school field trips highlights children's excitement in anticipation of these events, coupled with genuine learning opportunities that are available for students through experiences outside of typical classroom routines (Beale, 2000; Endreny, 2007; Morris, 2006; Noel, 2007; Smart & Marshall, 2007). Because the children in this study experienced animal-assisted literacy learning as an anticipated escape from regular classroom life, there seem to be many parallels between possibilities for within-classroom escapes and the traditional fieldtrip.

That all of the children chose to participate in this animal-assisted literacy program may seem like a small thing; but I find myself wondering how many of these children would choose to participate in typical school and classroom literacy practices each week. Because I was interested in understanding how the children experienced animal-assisted literacy sessions within their broader school literacy lives, my conversations during interviews and conversations with the students turned at times towards their favourite and least-favourite school subjects. Guided

Reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) and Writer's Workshop (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983) provided the underlying foundation for this classroom's literacy program. In addition, the children engaged in independent, silent reading of levelled books (including children's literature and early readers), which the students selected from designated baskets and read at their desks for approximately 20-30 minutes every day. They also participated in a daily home-reading program in which students also selected levelled books from a designated basket at their instructional reading level. Subsequently, the children were very conscious of their own guided reading level and of the reading level of their classmates, and as was discussed in Chapter 5, commonly spoke of their reading in terms of which level they had reached. When I asked about the students' favourite subjects at school, 'reading' was only mentioned by one student (incidentally, a girl, and the strongest reader in the class). The only other time reading was mentioned as a favourite subject was qualified by reading with the dogs (mentioned by two of the weakest readers in the class, both boys). In contrast, 6 children (4 boys and 2 girls) indicated that they disliked guided reading most of all of the subjects; 5 children (3 boys and 2 girls) indicated that they disliked independent reading the most, and 4 children (3 boys and 1 girl) mentioned a strong dislike for writer's workshop. However, 3 students mentioned that they loved writer's workshop because they got to write with the dogs. Collectively, over half of the class indicated that they disliked language arts most of all subjects. The subject most often mentioned to be a favourite was gym (13 students), closely followed by math, which was a favourite for 10 students.

Although I was unable to observe gym classes because I did not feel it would be a safe environment for the dogs to be in, the students' common love for math may be closely connected to the way in which this subject was taught in this classroom. When I asked these children what they liked most about gym and math, the students described these subjects as "fun because you can play games" (Interview 08-09-09). In observation of math lessons taught by the teacher, I noted the regular use of exciting, colourful visuals and games using the SMARTboard in which students were actively (and often physically) engaged in learning activities. During scheduled math periods, the students would often be scattered around the classroom, actively participating in learning games, and the classroom was filled with sounds of laughter and conversation. As noted by Nathan, his classroom teacher has a wonderful knack of "turning learning into games" during math lessons, and her love of this subject is obvious in her comments such as "See how much fun numbers are? That's why I love numbers so much, they're so cool, you can find patterns, they make sense" (Fieldnotes, p. 48).

In contrast, the students who disliked aspects of language arts referred to guided reading as "just boring" and seemed to resent the isolation of independent reading. As described by Amanda, during independent reading "we don't read to a partner we just read to ourselves". Despite the teacher's best efforts to spend time reading one-on-one or in small groups with students who struggled in reading during independent reading time, Daniel commented that "you have to read a hard book sometimes, you go to chapter books and then it's hard" (Interview 19-11-09). Although I'm still not sure why, despite continued invitations to both the children

and to the teacher for the children to borrow and read any of the books I brought at any time, my offer was never taken up by the students, nor was it encouraged by the teacher. It may be that this classroom's literacy program was designed such that there was limited time for student-selected reading material. As noted by Michael, "We got tons of books but we don't really read 'em cos we're too busy reading home reading books". It may also be that, because the books I brought with me were not levelled, the children would not have known which book(s) to choose, nor would reading these books count as 'reading' in their minds. As also noted by Michael, "They make different books back here" as compared to the kinds of stories they read during guided reading activities.

As in this classroom, over the past ten years, the popularity of levelled books has grown and is now a staple in many elementary language arts programs (Glasswell & Ford, 2010; Pitcher & Fang, 2007). Although levelled books have their merits, research demonstrates that problems can occur when "the ideas are driven more by trend than thoughtful application" (Brabham & Villaume, 2002, p. 438). Levelled text "refers to reading materials that represent a progression from more simple to more complex and challenging texts. Texts that have been levelled include books created for commercial programs, selections for basal reading anthologies, and children's literature. Different text progressions use different levelling criteria...[and] these progressions also reflect varying degrees of precision" (Brabham & Villaume, 2002, p. 438).

Brabham and Villaume (2002) articulate that levelled texts can be valuable in the classroom because they allow teachers to provide reading materials that are

at a student's instructional level. Further, these authors note that "exploring levelled text and guided reading has inspired many teachers to develop or adopt holistic performance assessments that use levelled books as benchmarks of reading progress" (p. 438). Glasswell and Ford (2010) point out that teachers are able to support students' reading of texts that would normally be considered frustrational within a learning environment where interactions are facilitated by the teacher using levelled text, thereby helping to accelerate a student's progress.

However, although unintended, levelled reading programs can also cause teachers to lose sight of other important aspects of students' literacy development. Levelled reading programs have been criticized for their de-emphasis on important skills related to constructing meaning and student self-selection of and enjoyment of literature, and a focus on students' incremental movement towards higher levels can distract teachers from genuine assessment of word-solving and comprehension skills (Brabham & Villuame, 2002). As Ford and Opitz (2010) point out, “teachers might be happy as a child moves through two or three levels of a guided reading program but forget that the child is still reading three grade levels from the benchmark for that grade level” (p. 4). Levelled texts have also been criticized because in an effort to keep texts 'decodable' for students, these texts commonly feature contrived language and therefore limit opportunities for vocabulary development and word-solving skills - skills that are crucial for 'real' readers (Brabham & Villuame, 2002). In addition, levelled reading programs have been criticized for taking away from "the transactions that occur between a reader, a text, and the social context in which they read" (Glasswell & Ford, 2010).

Continued uncertainty concerning which components should be considered when levelling texts contributes to a disturbing ambiguity around how educators might select or incorporate a levelled reading program in their classrooms (Cunningham et al., 2005). For example, some levelled texts are organized around particular attention towards high frequency words which contribute to students' word recognition skills, other texts are designed based upon the premise that increasing the number of decodable words through phonetic control supports students' learning of letter-sound relationships, while still others stress the importance of predictable text (text which provides numerous context cues for the reader). As emphasized by Cunningham et al. (2005), teachers should consider selecting text according to multiple criteria, which would offer support for student learning of high frequency words, support phonemic awareness, and provide valuable practice mastering context cues. In Cunningham et al.'s 2005 study, in which researchers examined the potential for Reading Recovery levelled books in supporting word recognition and decoding, levelled books were found to offer only modest support for word recognition and very minimal support for decoding instruction. Further, researchers warn that levelling systems may not be a particularly consistent gauge of text difficulty and can vary in quality[30] even within a given grade level (Pitcher & Fang, 2007). Ford and Opitz (2010) also note that word counts in levelled readers limit the amount of practice that those students who need it most are able to get, and emphasize that because many

[30] In Pitcher and Fang's (2007) study, 'quality' was determined according to the following key elements: a recognizable story structure and satisfactory ending, and rhythmic and natural-sounding language.

levelled texts are intended to interest younger students, they may not be appropriate or respectable for older students who are working at that level.

Levelled reading programs are not foolproof and teachers need to maintain an attentive and well-informed awareness of how and why they are using levelled text in their classrooms. Viewing levelled text "as a concept - not a formula" (Brabham & Villuame, 2002, p. 439) can help teachers to ensure that the way they incorporate levelled text into their language arts programs is based on a sophisticated understanding of their students' needs. As a result, it is essential for teachers to continually question and evaluate if and how levelled text may be appropriate as part of a well-informed language arts program. As Ford and Opitz (2010) remind us, "the teacher is the most important ingredient of any effective reading program" (p. 3).

It is perhaps important to note that this was the first year that Michelle, the classroom teacher, had incorporated writer's workshop into her language arts program. Therefore, it seems natural that there would be a certain number of growing pains associated with implementing a new program. Further, Michelle's perception of writing as a difficult subject to teach may have contributed to some students' negative attitudes towards writing, as I will discuss in more detail below:

> Writing is very hard to teach. Reading, you can get the kids to read and you know to move them up and stuff but writing is really hard, and I think that when you've got all of these mini lessons you're like oh yeah, I really should talk to them about that. That's an important thing. And other than

> that things just kind of slip and slide, right? Some kids get them from other resources but you forget to teach it as a whole group.

A subtle theme of anxiety on the part of the students regarding time pressures associated with writing, accompanied by the teacher's frustration about the quality and quantity of the students' writing became apparent as I spent more time in the classroom. Although only 4 students mentioned that they disliked writer's workshop, these children were able to clearly articulate specific aspects of the program that they didn't like. While shaking his head, Michael emphasized that, "It's like no fun. It's no fun at all" because "you have to write a whole bunch of words and stuff". During the same interview, Nathan elaborated on this topic: "We have to write every week and if we're not done by tomorrow then, well, you have to be done with your story." According to these boys, it would be better "If we limited it to less days...Cos we only have like three days or four days to do it".

It is interesting that reading and writing with the dogs did not feature as a favourite subject during interview discussions with the children in this classroom considering their enthusiastic and consistent choice to participate in this program, but not surprising if the majority of these children perceived these sessions as a temporary break from their typical school subjects. The contrast between the anticipation that the students demonstrated towards their animal-assisted literacy sessions and over half of the class's apparent dislike for many other classroom-based language arts activities, particularly when the students were so enthusiastic towards other academic subjects such as math, serves to illuminate part of the reason why this program was so popular with these students. As I suggested in the

introductory chapter and discussed in more depth in Chapter 3, the popularity of animal-assisted literacy programs in North America and abroad suggests that a gap exists between the kinds of literacy experiences children are currently encountering in schools and the kinds of support they may need or want. During final interviews with 15 of the students in this class, I asked them to rate what they thought of reading and writing with the dogs on a scale from one to ten. Every child who was interviewed rated the program as a ten. Similar to the way many of these students talked about their love of math, the students described reading and writing with Tango and Sparky as "fun". The students emphasized that "you can pet them and they're so soft", and seemed to appreciate the dog as audience for their reading and writing efforts as demonstrated through comments such as "it feels like [the dog] is listening to the book". Other students explained that, "when we're back here you can help us [with our reading] and we can learn the words and so it's not that hard". As Michael noted, when he's reading and writing with me and the dogs, he feels "not like, very, very lonely, I feel like we got some company, not like when we're at our desks". In particular, these students seemed to appreciate social opportunities to read and write in a small group with a dog as a 'soft' and responsive audience while getting extra help with literacy tasks, and these experiences perhaps increased in their significance when considered alongside the subtle anxiety some of these children experienced around writing in particular. Given these insights, future research into school-based animal-assisted literacy programs should closely consider not only the learning environment during animal-assisted literacy learning sessions, but should also pay careful

attention to the broader classroom language arts environment in seeking to understand how children experience these programs and in learning what the significance of these literacy experiences may be for them.

2. Playful, familiar experiences steeped in imagination

The many ways in which the children in this study seemed to experience animal-assisted literacy sessions as opportunities to engage in imaginative play with reading and writing resonates with what current scholars emphasize about effective literacy learning: that educators should work towards nurturing children's "sense of joy, playfulness, enthusiasm, and intention" towards text (Collins, 2008, p. xv). As was discussed in Chapter 3, Spencer (2003) notes that imagination is at the heart of children's meaning-making when they work with text, particularly as they engage with imaginative children's literature and, echoing Vygotsky (1978), notes that children "use imaginative language as they make worlds of play and stories" (p. 110). The various ways that many of these children and I actively included the dogs in literacy activities, including but not limited to eliciting Tango or Sparky as an audience for their reading and writing efforts, speaking directly to the dogs during literacy activities, showing the dogs pictures and words, telling them stories and asking them questions, and writing letters, poems, and songs for the dogs, illustrates the students' imaginative engagement in literacy activities during these sessions. Further, on one occasion, I observed how Tango and Sparky had inspired the children's imaginations outside of these sessions, during a math class. On this day, Sarah and Daniel were preparing to play a 'Go-Fish' math game. They had come over to the table at the

back of the room where I was writing observation notes (with Tango and Sparky resting in the dog stroller beside me). The following conversation ensued:

Daniel: *(to me:)* Do you wanna play with us?

Lori: That's ok, I'll just watch you play.

Sarah: Ok, let's be Tango and Sparky.

Daniel: Ok!

Sarah: I'm Sparky.

Daniel: I'm Tango.

Sarah: Ok, Tango, mix up your cards.

Daniel: Ok.

After several minutes of play, Sarah jumped up and said to Sparky:

Sarah: Sparky, we're winning!

Daniel looked over at Tango, and I sensed that he wanted to tell her something. The moment I opened up the stroller to let Tango's head stick out, Daniel came over and, putting his forehead close to hers, whispered:

Daniel: Don't worry Tango, you're on my team! (Fieldnotes, p. 81)

This snapshot into the world of these children's imaginative play resonates with Church's (2006) observation that many young children keep one foot planted inside reality and one foot outside of it. As was discussed in Chapter 3, Rosoff (2007) defines play as "stepping out of the confines of reality to imagine new identities and scenarios" (p. 59), and points out that play offers a safe method of practicing necessary skills for later use. The example offered above illustrates how children may engage in play as both an escape from and a preparation for

reality in temporarily taking on an alternative identity while practicing emerging skills. Similarly, the way that the children and I light-heartedly involved the dogs during their literacy sessions (as was more fully elaborated upon in Chapter 5) is bolstered by Harwayne's (2007) call for educators to "become advocates for more playfulness, more wide-open spaces, and less formal courses of study at the elementary level" (p. 1-2). Animal-assisted literacy learning programs such as this one may offer a novel and valuable response to Harwayne's (2007) request for educators to consider alternative methods to invite and sustain students' imaginative and playful engagement with text.

3. Novel, familial modes of interrelationship

Closely tied into what may have been a perceived lack of expectations by the students in this study, as I alluded to in Chapter 5, it may be that my conscious decision to take on the role of playful participant during these animal-assisted literacy sessions contributed to the students' carnivalesque engagement in reading and writing. In line with Bakhtin's articulation of carnival as providing participants with opportunities for a temporary release of traditional power hierarchies, Lensmire (1994) observed that during writer's workshop, the adult is among the children while providing students with ongoing and spontaneous writing assistance, rather than being at the front of the classroom, at a distance from children while delivering a planned lesson. Lensmire's (1994) description of the adult being among the students during writer's workshop resonates with the nature of the interactions the students and I had during animal-assisted literacy sessions in this study. As was discussed in Chapter 5, during animal-assisted

literacy sessions I was at a similar level with the students, both physically because we were all sitting on pillows, and with regard to power relations because the range of choices made available to children during these sessions were largely shared among group participants. However, it seemed that having a dog involved invited, for me, numerous opportunities for playfulness not typically available during small-group literacy sessions. For example, I initiated the dog's involvement by asking the students if they wanted Sparky to face them or face the book (they wanted him to face the book) (Fieldnotes, p. 17), I would hold Tango up so that she could 'see' the children's writing (and the students would sometimes hold her paws while they read to her) (Fieldnotes, p. 26), or I would ask the dog for her ideas about what she thinks a child should write about (which would elicit giggles from the students and a verbal contribution about what the dog might answer) (Fieldnotes, p. 50). At other times, the students playfully involved the dogs themselves by asking the dog to hold their eraser or other writing materials (Fieldnotes, p. 26), by showing the dog a new highlighter or an art project they had made (Fieldnotes, p. 64), or by pointing out pictures and words for the dog in the book we were reading (Fieldnotes, p. 84).

The data suggest that the students and I are participants in a light-hearted dance, involving the dogs as active group members during numerous playful interactions within these animal-assisted literacy sessions. Although it is difficult to know if my approach to these animal-assisted literacy sessions might have influenced the nature of the students' involvement, or vice-versa, contemporary literacy scholars exploring learner participation through the lens of Bakhtin's

carnival suggests that "a certain type of adult participation may facilitate opportunities for children's participation in community activities and for learning" (Toohey, Waterstone, & Lemke, 2000, p. 421). Upon examining three events in a Punjabi Sikh classroom which were illustrative of three different learning models (adult-run, child-run, and community of practice), these authors suggest that carnivalesque interaction was most likely during the event defined as a community of practice, and requires "a particular kind of adult engagement: a willingness to play and an ability to sense 'the joyful relativity of all structure and order' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 124)" (Toohey, Waterstone, & Lemke, 2000, p. 432). Toohey and colleagues (2000) go on to suggest that, "interaction with a playful adult seems to facilitate opportunities for more productive speech community over one that overtly privileges or disables certain individuals. The focus of energy on play generates a great deal of language from several performers, and the meaning making of such narratives propels the use of language" (p. 433). Further, a recent study by Iddings and McCafferty (2007) examining off-task carnivalesque interactions of kindergarten children who are second language learners suggests that during such episodes, "the children were engaged in playful, spontaneous, and imaginative discourse. They played off one another in a dramatic and contingent manner" (p. 42). These authors suggest that carnivalesque learning opportunities allow for a shift in focus for second language learners from skills-based "to an emphasis on imagination and the production of culture" (p. 42), and recommend that educators attempt to set up the conditions for carnival to occur as legitimate classroom activities, rather than viewing them as

disruptive off-task behaviours. Although further research is required to examine how the light-hearted participation of an adult during animal-assisted literacy sessions may facilitate active student involvement, data from this study indicate that my conscious decision to playfully engage the dogs in learning contributed to an enjoyable literacy learning environment, steeped in imagination and laughter.

As was discussed in Chapter 5, the dog seemed to serve as a soft social bridge between students of varying reading and writing levels during animal-assisted literacy sessions which in turn transformed the network of relationships within the group. Instead of an emphasis on guided reading levels, a redirection of focus on reading and writing to and with the dog as audience, combined with close physical contact with the dogs and with each other contributed to a unique and familial form of support and comfort for these students during literacy activities. Opportunities for the students to hug, cuddle, and be close to the dog seemed to focus student attention, particularly for the boys in the class. These insights resonate with findings from research examining other animal-assisted programs with children in school and therapeutic contexts, as was introduced in Chapter 2. In their 1997 study, Limond, Bradshaw, and Cormick concluded that one group of students aged 7 to 12 years who had learning disabilities were more attentive, more responsive, and more cooperative with an adult when a real dog (as opposed to a stuffed animal) is present during learning activities, and highlight that the dog "encouraged positive interactions and focused the children's attention on the activity" (p. 88). Further, "the children were less often distracted by, for example, other objects or noises" outside of these animal-assisted sessions (p. 88).

As was discussed in Chapter 5, on more than one occasion as my critical friend observed videos of animal-assisted literacy learning sessions, she commented that she was surprised at how well the students were attending to the work at hand, considering how much background noise there was in the classroom. An explanation for how a dog might focus student attention is noted by Limond et. al (1997) in discussion of Redefer and Goodman's (1989) work:

> Redefer and Goodman (1989) point to the simple, repetitive and nonverbal nature of a dog's behaviour, which is at the same time easy to decode but also demanding. They add that a dog may focus attention on itself by virtue of providing multisensory stimulation, a hypothesis borne out in this study. Here the real dog's animatedness appears to be the active component. (p. 89)

As was introduced in Chapter 2, a more recent study by Prothmann, Bienert, and Ettrich (2006) which examined how interacting with a dog affects the state of mind of children and adolescents diagnosed with psychiatric disorders, concluded that the dog significantly and positively affected the participants both socially and emotionally. Specifically, Prothmann et. al (2006) highlight that "...the presence of a dog increased to a large extent the alertness and attention of the child [and] caused more openness and desire for social contact and exchange," (p. 275). More specifically, Prothmann et. al (2006) articulate that when children and adolescents participated in animal-assisted sessions, their alertness increased by 16 times, which suggests that interaction with a dog significantly and positively influenced the state of mind of these children. These researchers highlight how interaction

with a dog seemed to have transported the children and adolescents involved in their study "into an atmosphere that is characterized by warmth, acceptance, and empathy" (p. 275).

As was discussed in Chapter 5, the rhythm of physical interaction that featured strongly in this study suggests that the multisensory opportunities to interact with the dog contributed to an atmosphere of warmth that served to focus student attention during animal-assisted literacy learning sessions. Further, this physical interaction deepened over time, displayed through an increase in touch, hugs, and kisses from the children to the dogs, and was facilitated through their meaningful engagement in literacy: when the students wrote to the dogs and when 'the dogs wrote back to them.' Therefore, the findings of this study resonate with current research exploring animal-assisted programs which suggest that a dog can serve as multisensory stimulation for focusing children's attention (Prothmann et. al, 2006), particularly when children are engaged in academic tasks (Limond et. al, 1997; Redefer & Goodman, 1989). However, although the dog as a focus of attention seemed to be most prevalent with the boys in this study, this observation has likely not been noted in previous research and therefore deserves further examination in future studies.

Finally, all three aspects of novel forms of interrelationship as discussed above – the dog (without expectations) and adult as playful participants during literacy activities, genuine and spontaneous learning through the ongoing and meaningful involvement of the dog and sharing of choices by all group members, and multisensory stimulation serving as a source of student comfort and as a focus

for student attention – seemed to be nurtured by the lack of an imposed structure within these animal-assisted literacy learning sessions. It was impossible to determine in advance how the dog might become involved in literacy activities with each group of children, children who came to these experiences with a wide range of attitudes and beliefs, degrees of comfort and interest in literacy and in dogs. The books we read and the pieces of writing and related illustrations that students elected to work on were as unique and varied as the children themselves, and we had the luxury of flexibility and freedom to respond to each situation and to each group dynamic in unique, relevant, and meaningful ways. This lack of an imposed structure on literacy learning is supported by current literacy scholars. As emphasized by Harwayne (2007):

> Each day I spend with my grandchildren reminds me even more of how important it is to steer away from absolutes. Just as I am able to respond to each grandchild because of his or her unique qualities, teachers should be able to respond to students because of what they know and love about them rather than what a program tells them to do. Unfortunately, in too many schools, there is an expectation that all teaching should look the same. It's time for educators to say "Enough!" to those demands; to say "No!" to pre-fabricated curriculum units, test-prep marathons, and lesson plans that are carved in stone; and to build curriculum from children rather than from scripts." (pp. 1-2)

As was suggested in Chapter 3, the lack of an externally imposed structure is also supported by current research examining school-based literacy mentoring

programs with elementary school children. As early as 1992, Flaxman and Ascher highlighted how "unlike traditional teaching where everyone is supposed to learn the same curriculum, often at the same pace - despite personal interests, abilities, or conflicts - mentoring asks that these very interests and conflicts be at the heart of the relationship between the adult and the youth" (p. 11). Ellis, Small-McGinley, and De Fabrizio (2001) emphasize that when adult mentors and students take on more equitable roles as collaborators and friends, these alternative roles open possibilities for unique and valuable forms of interrelationship and support for young learners:

> In their own wonderful ways, each of the mentors showed the magic of the responsiveness and play between two people as they read each other's intentions, signals, and needs. The examples in these case studies suggest how counterproductive it could be to rigidly prescribe how time should be spent by two people in a one-on-one mentoring situation. (p. 190)

Ellis, Small-McGinley, and De Fabrizio (2001) emphasize that school-based mentoring programs with children should resist externally prescribed structures within mentoring sessions, and allow, instead, for the children and mentors to construct their own. The routines these researchers observed, along with a "clear emphasis on literacy-based activities ... contributed to students' security and trust around what to expect each week" (p. 104). In this study of one animal-assisted literacy learning program, similar routines were established (as described in Chapter 4), achieved through initial whole-class discussions with the children and through the organization of regular visits on Tuesday and Thursday mornings and

clear designation on a visual chart of when each child's turn would occur. Routines during our sessions, such as students washing their hands when they first arrived, taking a few minutes for hellos and stories, deciding on and engaging in that day's literacy-based activity, giving the dog a treat and students washing their hands again at the end of the session, also largely contributed to many of the students' enthusiasm and anticipation towards their participation in knowing what to expect. Finally, a similar emphasis on literacy activities during small-group animal-assisted sessions, while simultaneously allowing for a great deal of flexibility and variation in order to attend to individual student needs and interests, offered the children in this study a unique form of individualized academic support in the classroom.

4. A potential transformative connection

The potential for these animal-assisted literacy learning experiences to foster transformative, carnivalesque connections between children's home and school literacy lives was illustrated in a very real way for me just recently as I followed an entirely unrelated local event on the news. On July 22-25, 2010, the San Diego Convention Centre hosted an international (and sold-out) annual sci-fi convention called "Comic-Con." For four days, famous comic book characters took over the city of San Diego. The news featured stories of how the city was transformed by locals dressing up in their favourite superhero or zombie costumes for various events, 'Klingons' playfully taking over the downtown trolley station and demanding that downtown street signs be re-written in their own language (which they were), and excited rumours buzzed about stars such as Sylvester

Stallone, Bruce Willis and Angelina Jolie being on the guest list. But what truly caught my attention was a brief story about a handful of teachers and school administrators who had decided to embrace their students' fascination with comic books and the characters who featured in their worlds. The teachers reported that bringing comic books into their classrooms had not only sparked the students' enthusiasm towards reading, but had inspired a range of literacy projects. After some searching, I learned that a program called "The Comic Book Project" which is hosted by Columbia University Teacher's College, is an arts-based literacy approach designed to offer children an "alternative pathway to literacy by writing, designing, and publishing original comic books" (Center for Educational Pathways, 2010).

I was intrigued; I observed several parallels between this program and animal-assisted literacy learning. By drawing on a fascination which appeals to many children's imaginations but an interest that is not commonly embraced in the school setting (comic books, live animals) and co-design of literacy activities with ongoing input from their students, these teachers had inspired the children in their classrooms to engage in meaningful literacy learning at school. As was discussed in Chapter 3, over 50% of Canadian families own pets (Ontario Veterinary Medical Association, 2007). Well above this average, 89% (or 16 out of 18) of the students involved in this study have pets at home, with 67% (or 12 out of 18) of these children's families owning dogs (and many of the other students indicating that they wanted a dog but couldn't get one for a variety of reasons). It makes sense, then, that for many of the children in this classroom, being around a dog

while participating in literacy activities in the school setting would invite meaningful connections to their home lives. As was discussed in Chapter 5, the second world of these animal-assisted literacy learning sessions invited forays into literacy experiences not common in typical school practices for the children in this study, and seemed to be closely connected to the carnivalesque 'transforming influence' (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 107) that these literacy experiences had for them. Reading and writing with Tango and Sparky inspired meaningful at-home literacy conversations (and may have inspired positive at-home reading habits) and contributed to positive associations with literacy learning at school. Popular book choices amongst the children included subtle elements of grotesque realism such as is evident in *Walter the Farting Dog* (Kotzwinkle & Murray, 2001); books which do not typically feature in classroom libraries but which the children owned at home and commonly self-selected in this study. Reading and writing activities in this space allowed for an exploration of topics not commonly encouraged at school, but, as is demonstrated by the popularity of the *Captain Underpants* (Pilkey, 2002) book series in grade 2 classrooms, topics which have a track record of approval with this age group.

The positive connections between children's at-home and school literacy lives that were fostered through their participation in animal-assisted literacy learning sessions suggests that these experiences served as both positive and transformative, and similar to the inclusion of comic books in classrooms, calls into question the kinds of text that educators might deem appropriate for readers and writers in this age group. My concern with many of the young literacy

learners in this classroom aligns with Kathy Collins' comment about children's relationships with literacy at school: "The point I want to make is that many of us grow to love reading in spite of what happened in school, not because of it" (Collins, 2004, p. xi). If over half of the children in this grade 2 classroom have already indicated that language arts is their least favourite subject at school, it seems that attentive consideration of the kinds of texts and experiences they are choosing to engage in can provide insight into how educators might begin to shift students' attention more favourably towards literacy.

Considerations for future research

Following from the insights gleaned from this study, specific areas of research exploring animal-assisted literacy learning programs with children which may warrant further attention include the following:

- In what ways might animal-assisted literacy learning engage children's imaginations as they work with text?
- How might the adult as playful participant, adult expectations, and/or the notion of 'familial experiences' contribute to or hinder student's engagement in literacy activities during animal-assisted learning sessions?
- In what ways might a dog serve as a soft social bridge amongst children and with an adult in other classroom contexts?
- Does multi-sensory stimulation during animal-assisted literacy learning sessions serve to focus student attention in other classrooms?

- What kinds of texts deserve reading in the classroom? An exploration of children's and teachers' criteria for appropriate, good quality literature.
- Might animal-assisted literacy sessions serve as potentially transformative experiences for children's broader at-school and home literacy lives?

In addition to these areas of research, the emergent nature of animal-assisted literacy programs in schools and libraries in North America and abroad opens possibilities for a range of exciting future studies. Because this is likely the first study exploring children's experiences of an animal-assisted literacy learning program in North America, further research is required to explore how children in other contexts and in culturally and socio-economically diverse classrooms experience animal-assisted literacy learning across Canada and the U.S. As was discussed in Chapter 3, animal-assisted literacy programs in schools in Asia, Australia, and in India offer intriguing opportunities for exploring children's experiences and perceptions of animal-assisted literacy learning in classrooms around the world. Case study research in other countries would contribute to a rich collection of voices exploring how children experience animal-assisted literacy learning, and would assist researchers in determining the significant underlying aspects of these experiences for children across varying cultural contexts. Having lived for one year in Australia and for two years in Hong Kong, I am particularly drawn to the concept of animal-assisted literacy programs in Hong Kong because the emergence of these programs may be a subtle indication of a contemporary shift around the perception and role that animals, and dogs in particular, play in Chinese culture. Designing a case study into how one

classroom of children in Hong Kong or in China experiences animal-assisted literacy learning is an area of research that could be very productive. Further, future studies might also explore the long-term implications of children's participation in these programs and what the nature of these implications are in relation to literacy. A related, follow-up study focused on exploring the perceptions of this class of grade 2 students' experiences of animal-assisted literacy learning one or two years after having been involved in the program is an area of research that could also be most informative.

Children's experiences of animal-assisted literacy learning in higher elementary grades may also warrant attention in future studies. Nearly every week throughout the course of this study, as I walked down the hall with Tango and Sparky in their dog stroller, we were greeted by children in grades 4 and 5 who asked why only this grade 2 class got to read to the dogs, and who asked if the students in their classrooms could read to the dogs, too (Field notes, p. 59). The classroom teacher, Michelle, also indicated that she thinks this program would benefit children in the upper elementary grades (Interview 15-12-09), and one of the parents of the children in the classroom involved in this study who teaches grade 5 asked if I would consider working with the students in her classroom in a follow-up study (Interview 16(2)-12-09). In fact, this parent and grade 5 teacher asked my permission for her to write an article for the local newspaper about how positive this experience has been for her son and for her family (Interview 16(2)-12-09).

Although not a study focused specifically on literacy, a recent meta-analysis by Hummel and Randler (2011) suggests that incorporating live animals, and mammals in particular, in the classroom can positively affect middle school students' intrinsic motivation and long-term knowledge retention. Hummel and Randler (2011) explored 599 middle school students' intrinsic motivation and knowledge when living animals were incorporated into science lessons in classrooms in Germany. More specifically, Hummel and Randler (2011) examined whether involving living animals in the curriculum is 'superior' to other forms of classroom teaching. The students in this study were divided into three groups: one group involved living animals in non-evasive experiments (woodlice, snails, and mice), the second group was taught involving these animals in film only, and the third served as a control group. Interestingly, Hummel and Randler (2011) found that "the intrinsic motivational variables differed only between the two mouse treatments" (p. 8). The authors note that

> ...this might be influenced by the fact that mice are mammals, which in turn, requests that further studies should also take different animal species from different classes into account...Overall, the living mice treatment was assessed as the best (highest values in the variables interest and competence as well as the lowest in pressure)." (Hummel & Randler, 2011, pp. 8-9)

Hummel and Randler's (2011) findings resonate somewhat with Nimer and Lundahl's (2007) meta-analysis, in which these authors determined that dogs, also mammals, demonstrated the most positive gains for children, which was not

necessarily the case with other animals (unfortunately, no studies involving mice and children were noted in this earlier meta-analysis to serve as a comparison). Further, Hummel and Randler (2011) found positive correlations between middle school students' motivation and achievement not only during the study but 7-8 months following the study as determined by follow-up testing, "emphasizing a long-lasting effect of motivation on long-term retention of knowledge" (p. 9). This emphasis on lasting effects is significant because, as I discussed in Chapter 2, one of the greatest criticisms of animal-assisted programs has been the lack of evidence of long-term benefits for students when involving animals in classrooms. However, Hummel and Randler (2011) note that these positive outcomes may also be related to the fact that much of the work the students did in the classroom with the animals was self-determined (the students were encouraged to design their own experiments with the animals after lessons in how to handle them appropriately). Similar to the students' involvement in my study, these students enjoyed a sense of informed agency when working with the animals. Hummel and Randler's (2011) findings indicate that further research examining how student-determined interaction with mammals in the classroom can influence middle students' intrinsic motivation to learn and retention of knowledge is an intriguing and important area of study.

Can animal-assisted literacy learning be defined as mentorship?

In Chapter 3, the concept of the adult and dog working together with children as "literacy mentor teams" (R.E.A.D., 2007) was introduced. In that chapter, I discussed how human-only school-based mentoring programs

commonly feature the child's relationship with the adult while being supported academically, whereas within animal-assisted literacy programs, the focus is often primarily on the child's relationship with the dog as he or she engages in literacy activities. Within the context of this study, I consider how these children experienced an animal-assisted literacy program when the adult participated as part of a 'literacy mentor team', thereby working to develop a meaningful relationship with each child while providing academic support through interactions with the dog.

Therefore, consideration of whether these animal-assisted learning experiences can be defined as mentorship can be achieved by a return to the definition of mentor as introduced in Chapter 3 within the context of the insights gleaned from this study. Again, Brodkin and Coleman (1996) define mentorship with a dual focus on relationship as well as academics, as one who: "....provides one-to-one support and attention, is a friend and role model, boosts a child's self-esteem, enhances a student's educational experience" (p. 21). Ways that the children were supported by the literacy mentor team with regard to each aspect of this definition, drawn from the findings of this study, are outlined below.

One-to-one support and attention:

- As I discussed in Chapter 3, Small-McGinley (2000) noted that the majority of school-based mentoring programs require a one-on-one relationship between the mentor and protégé, developed over time through regular weekly meetings. Although the children did participate in regularly

scheduled weekly sessions, they participated, for the most part, in pairs during animal-assisted sessions rather than spending one-on-one time with the dog and adult. However, as was previously discussed, the flexibility within these sessions allowed for ongoing opportunities for responsive, meaningful, and individualized support for each child while engaged in reading and writing activities.

- The children described my role as someone who could help them with words they don't know when reading and writing, and specified that the dog's role was to listen to their stories, to help them to concentrate, to inspire them to read, and to help them by letting them cuddle with them. These comments indicate that the children were aware of the individualized assistance they were getting while participating in these sessions.
- Although the children would commonly choose to read a book while taking turns reading out loud, I provided ongoing individualized assistance while involving the dog as each child needed or requested with regard to various aspects of reading, such as decoding skills, vocabulary development, comprehension, and punctuation use. When the children chose to work on individual self-authored pieces of text, each child developed his or her own unique piece of writing and/or related illustration with ongoing assistance and support from me as we involved the dog in a myriad of responsive and unique ways (as was discussed in Chapter 5).

- Finally, because the children self-selected the text(s) and/or writing topics during these sessions, the nature of the support and attention provided to each child varied as a reflection of individual student interests, varying comfort levels with literacy and with dogs, and in response to unique group dynamics.

A friend and role model:

- The data indicate that the dog served as a soft social bridge among group members who were otherwise separated physically by desks, academically through reading levels, and socially by peer networks, and represented a patient, constant, and responsive source of comfort and friendship.
- A temporary leveling of power and consequent possibility of judgment through sharing of choices by group members suggests that the dog was perceived as a friend by the students in this classroom, and suggests a modeling of respect for all group members' ideas and agency on the part of the adult.
- In consciously taking on the role of 'playful participant' during these sessions, I worked to consistently honour and support students' literacy decisions and ideas. Our playful interactions while involving the dog in literacy activities may have served as a model for positive associations with literacy.

Self-esteem:

- Children who felt insecure around dogs and/or with literacy enjoyed increased confidence through their participation in this program, and some children indicated that they felt privileged or special for being part of this program.
- For children who struggled in literacy or who found themselves on the periphery of social groups in the classroom, the dog served as something 'in common' while modeling characteristics of friendship such as patience and unconditional acceptance.
- These sessions provided opportunities for children to touch and cuddle with the dogs while being close to their classmates, contributed to feelings of comfort, offset feelings of loneliness, and supported children who experienced feelings of anxiety about writing.

An enhanced educational experience:

- Participation in this program contributed to an increased enthusiasm towards going to school and served as a highly anticipated activity in the children's school week.
- Animal-assisted literacy sessions nurtured opportunities for the students to engage in imaginative play during reading and writing activities.
- The dog served to focus student attention through multisensory stimulation, particularly for the boys in the class, and contributed to an atmosphere of warmth.

- The students' participation inspired and motivated the students to participate in meaningful reading and writing activities at school in the broader classroom context, and inspired at-home literacy conversations.

This analysis indicates that although the children in this animal-assisted literacy program participated (for the most part) in pairs, they were provided with individualized support and attention in literacy during each session as needed or requested. As I discussed in Chapter 5, the dog(s) in particular seemed to be perceived as friends for the students because of their patient, constant, responsive, and non-judgmental presence, while the adult mentor modeled respect and reinforced student agency through the sharing of group choices, and modeled kindness and compassion for all group members through care in establishing and maintaining a safe and comfortable atmosphere for learning. These sessions seemed to support students' self-esteem through their perceived privileged involvement and through contributing to feelings of comfort and unconditional acceptance, and enhanced children's educational experience in a myriad of ways.

Although the notion of the adult and dog serving as literacy mentor teams warrants further examination in future research, the insights gleaned from this study indicate that the kinds of literacy support the children received during animal-assisted literacy learning sessions align with the definition of mentorship as outlined by Brodkin and Coleman (1996) and can therefore be defined as mentorship experiences. However, other interactions which featured during animal-assisted literacy learning for the students in this study, but which are not common in human-only mentoring experiences (and nor am I suggesting that they

should they be), such as ongoing opportunities for close physical touch and multi-sensory stimulation by petting and cuddling with the dog, suggests that the qualities outlined in the definition of mentorship above does not fully capture the nature of the interactions between participants in this context. Therefore, Brodkin and Coleman's (1996) definition of mentorship (which was intended to describe human-only mentoring situations) not surprisingly allows for a necessary but not sufficient description of the nature of the interactions among group members during these animal-assisted literacy learning sessions.

Some final thoughts

> When I was barely seven and thought I might be Miss America when I grew up, I chose acting as my talent. I borrowed a large brown book from the Uptown library, titled something like "Fifty Monologues Guaranteed to Win Contests." I don't remember a one of them now, but back then I'd curl up in my bed with my dog, Happy, and memorize them. Following the "helpful" directions for emoting, staging, and costuming, I'd practice in front of Happy and my full length mirror. (Richardson, 1997, p. 188)

This excerpt, borrowed from Laurel Richardson's *Fields of Play* (1997), beautifully illustrates the ease and simplicity with which interaction with a dog was seamlessly woven into the tapestry of another child's private and imaginative world as she engaged with text. It's interesting how this author cannot remember the content of any of the speeches she memorized, but the memory of her dog as a partner in her practicing efforts clearly stands out. As an adult who shares similar

memories about my own dog while growing up, paired with an emerging understanding of how the children in one grade 2 classroom experienced literacy learning with a dog, I have become increasingly aware of the many ways in which my dogs have served as a carnivalesque inspiration and audience for my dissertation writing. In these final pages of the dissertation, I consider how my own 'animal-assisted writing experiences' resonate with the experiences of the participants involved in this study - and interestingly, with other well-known classical female writers in close relationship with the dogs in their lives.

Similar to my surprise when I read about Richardson's (1997) description of her early experiences with her dog Happy, I was intrigued when I discovered the work of Maureen Adams, Ph.D., who wrote a book titled "Shaggy Muses" (2007), which is based on her dissertation work. In Adams (2007) book, she explores how the writings of classical female writers, including Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Edith Wharton, and Emily Brontë was inspired, shaped, and supported emotionally, socially, and physically in part through close relationships with the dogs in their lives. From a psychological perspective, Adams (1999) examines how, for example, Emily Dickinson "came to appreciate [her dog's] silence as a witness to her creative process" (p. 132). As Adams (2007) explains:

> The attachments of these five women to their dogs mirrored the attachments I have had with my own. Like Emily Brontë, I have had a relationship with a difficult dog who responded to me with devoted loyalty. Like Emily Dickinson, I have felt alone and powerless in the

> world, and a dog has made me feel safe. Recently, a joyful little dog like Flush has filled my days with play and happiness. And I count on long walks with dogs to lift the solitude that comes when writing, as did Virginia Woolf and Emily Brontë. Dogs help me to feel more at home in the world, as generations of lapdogs did for Edith Wharton in her years of restless travel between the United States and Europe. (p. xi)

Although these writers were adults, the many ways that these dogs seemed to have supported these women in their literacy lives resonates with the many ways that the children in this study felt uniquely supported when engaged in literacy learning with Tango and Sparky. Also similar to the experiences of these writers, my own deep care for my dogs and the love they have brought into my life have offered a carnivalesque second world and a comforting escape as I wrote this dissertation, for the most part, in solitude. An essential part of our family unit, my dogs' soft and rhythmic breathing as they slept at my feet, and their present, trusting eyes when I needed a confidence boost, contributed to an atmosphere of calm and warmth as I continued to think and write. The daily exercise they require forced me to take several breaks in the fresh air throughout the day, and these walks would offer much-needed interaction with other people as strangers on the street would stop to say hello (most often to my dogs). Finally, Tango and Sparky's daily requests for play, combined with their unique personality quirks which make me laugh out loud, contributed to a much-needed escape for me on a regular basis and reminded me to maintain a sense of balance while engaged in a process that at times felt overwhelming. Their calmness and utter lack of

awareness of the daily pressures I feel momentarily transports me to a world without care - much as I imagine they experience a great part of their lives.

It is only now that I am beginning to understand the carnivalesque impact that dogs have had on my own literacy life, an understanding that has emerged from listening carefully and paying respectful attention to the words, actions, and interactions of the children in one grade 2 classroom. As Nathan described it, "When you have an animal, or somebody that you love with you, it helps get you into the book". In capturing the human imagination, or perhaps in reminding us of our own necessary and ancient connection with the natural world, dogs have been invited into our lives, into our homes, and into our hearts for centuries. In contrast, the field of study examining the child-animal bond is in its infancy. For me, this research has served as a refreshing reminder of the honesty and brilliance of young minds. Hopefully, children like Nathan will help us to begin to understand -- and remember -- that it's not simply about 'reading to a dog' but about honouring the magical, playful, peaceful space in connection to each other as human and non-human animals that can serve as regenerative and transformative experiences.

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APPENDIX A
INITIAL LETTER OF CONTACT FOR THE PARENTS/SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

Date

Dear _____,

My name is Lori Friesen, and I am a PhD candidate in the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta. I would like to extend an invitation for _____ and her class to participate in a research project for which I will be the primary investigator. The purpose of this research is to explore how children experience literacy learning with a therapy dog in an elementary language arts classroom. Recent studies exploring the relationship between children and animals in educational contexts suggests that because of dogs' generally unconditional and accepting nature, they may be able to offer unique support for children's learning and development. This research will be conducted in partial fulfillment for the degree of PhD in Elementary Education, Language and Literacy. This study will not interfere with the regular teaching and learning in _____'s language arts classroom.

Data for this study will be collected using the following procedures:

- **Video and Audio-taping:** I will be visiting the classroom for two mornings each week from October until December with my two registered therapy dogs. During this time, the children will be invited to sign up for individual or small-group text-based oral language activities with myself and with one of the dogs. These sessions will be audio and video-taped, and will be approximately 15 minutes in length. We will be able to accommodate approximately five sessions each morning that we visit.

- **Observations:** For the remainder of the two mornings each week (when not engaged in individual and/or small-group literacy activities), I will observe the children as they engage in regular language arts activities and write anecdotal field notes. Upon the teacher's invitation, the therapy dog and I may be invited to participate in language arts activities as appropriate opportunities arise.

- **Pre-interview Activities**: Pre-interview activities are designed to "support getting-to-know-you conversations with a child, enable the child to teach the researcher about the context of interest, [and] provide the child with the opportunity to recall and select memories to share" (Ellis, 2006, p. 118). For the purposes of this study, the pre-interview activity at the beginning of the study will be the design of "All About Me" posters. Mid-way through the study, the pre-interview activity may take the form of a picture and a paragraph about their classroom before the dog was incorporated into the language arts class, and after. At the conclusion of the study, the pre-interview activity may encourage children to give advice for future classrooms that are considering incorporating a therapy dog into language arts. All pre-interview activities will take place in the regular classroom context under the direct supervision of the classroom teacher, and will connect to the language arts curriculum.

- **Interviews**: As a follow-up to each of the pre-interview activities, several children will be selected in an effort to represent a wide range of literacy skills and attitudes towards literacy within the classroom. These children will be asked if they would like to participate in semi-structured interviews at the beginning of the study, approximately mid-way through the study, and at the end of the study. The interviews will be predominantly child-led, using their pre-interview activities as a springboard for conversation, and each interview will be approximately a half-hour in length. Ms. _____ will also participate in three interviews during the course of this study.

- **Literacy Artefacts:** Throughout the study, children's writing, pictures, and other literacy projects may inform the topic of study. If such an artefact is identified, I will ask the child for permission to borrow it. If permission is freely given, the artifact will then be scanned and/or photocopied, and returned to the child at the conclusion of the study or sooner.

Should any research assistants participate in the data collection or analysis stages of this study, they will comply with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants (Please see: http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/gfcpolicymanual/policymanualsection66.cfm). All other research personnel involved in this study will sign a confidentiality agreement to ensure that privacy and anonymity are protected. Further, special considerations will be in place to ensure the safety and well-being of all participants. The therapy dogs participating in this study have extensive experience working in my own Grade 2 classroom with children, and have been registered through the Pet Therapy Society of Northern Alberta. This means that the dogs have obedience training, have been screened for having an appropriate temperament for working with children in the classroom context, are well groomed, and are up to date on all shots and necessary medications. The therapy dogs do not shed. Prior to and immediately following each child's interactions with the therapy dog, they will wash their hands with a hand-sanitizer. The dogs will enter the school after the final bell has rung and the students are all in their classrooms, thus limiting potential contact between the dogs and students not participating in the study. Finally, two dogs have been selected for this study to minimize potential stress on the animals, such that should one dog get tired, the other will be available to take over. The dog that is not in contact with the children will rest in a kennel away from the students, and at no point during the study will a child interact with a dog unsupervised.

All individuals reserve the right to not participate in this study, and are free to withdraw prior to the end of January, 2010, without prejudice. The privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality of all participants will be protected through the use of pseudonyms and through the removal of all identifying information from data collected. All data collected from this study will be kept in a locked space in the researcher's university office for a minimum of five years following completion of the research project, and when appropriate, will be destroyed in a way that ensures confidentiality. Should participants be interested in obtaining a copy of the research findings generated from this study, please contact myself, Lori Friesen, at lfriesen@ualberta.ca or by phone at 780-454-1156 upon completion of this research. Findings resulting from this study may be published in research articles and/or books, and presented at conferences upon its completion. The data for all uses will be handled in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants as indicated above.

Should you have any questions or concerns about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me, Lori Friesen, via email: lfriesen@ualberta.ca or by phone, 780-454-1156. You may also contact my supervisor at the University of Alberta, Dr. Joyce Bainbridge, at joyce.bainbridge@ualberta.ca, or by phone at the Office of the Associate Dean: 780-492-3751.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751.

Thank you for considering my invitation to participate in this research project.

Cordially,

Lori Friesen
PhD Candidate, Year III
University of Alberta

APPENDIX B
INITIAL LETTER OF CONTACT FOR THE TEACHER

Date

Dear _____,

My name is Lori Friesen, and I am a PhD candidate in the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta. I would like to extend an invitation for you to participate in a research project for which I will be the primary investigator. The purpose of this research is to explore how children experience literacy learning with a therapy dog in an elementary language arts classroom. Recent studies exploring the relationship between children and animals in educational contexts suggests that because of dogs' generally unconditional and accepting nature, they may be able to offer unique support for children's learning and development. This research will be conducted in partial fulfillment for the degree of PhD in Elementary Education, Language and Literacy. This study will not interfere with the regular teaching and learning in your language arts classroom.

Data for this study will be collected using the following procedures:

- **Video and Audio-taping:** I would like to visit your classroom for two mornings each week from October until December with my two registered therapy dogs. During this time, the children will be invited to sign up for individual or small-group text-based oral language activities with myself and with one of the dogs. These sessions will be audio and video-taped, and will be approximately 15 minutes in length. We will be able to accommodate approximately five sessions each morning that we visit.

- **Observations:** For the remainder of the two mornings each week (when not engaged in individual and/or small-group literacy activities), I will observe the children as they engage in regular language arts activities and write anecdotal field notes. Upon the teacher's invitation, the therapy dog and I may be invited to participate in language arts activities as appropriate opportunities arise.

- **Pre-interview Activities**: Pre-interview activities are designed to "support getting-to-know-you conversations with a child, enable the child to teach the researcher about the context of interest, [and] provide the child with the opportunity to recall and select memories to share" (Ellis, 2006, p. 118). For the purposes of this study, the pre-interview activity at the beginning of the study will be the design of "All About Me" posters. Mid-way through the study, the pre-interview activity may take the form of a picture and a paragraph about their classroom before the dog was incorporated into the language arts class, and after. At the conclusion of the study, the pre-interview activity may encourage children to give advice for future classrooms that are considering incorporating a therapy dog into language arts. All pre-interview activities will take place in the regular classroom context under the direct supervision of the classroom teacher, and will connect to the language arts curriculum.

- **Interviews**: As a follow-up to each of the pre-interview activities, several children will be selected in an effort to represent a wide range of literacy skills and attitudes towards literacy within the classroom. These children will be asked if they would like to participate in semi-structured interviews at the beginning of the study, approximately mid-way through the study, and at the end of the study. The interviews will be predominantly child-led, using their pre-interview activities as a springboard for conversation, and each interview will be approximately a half-hour in length. As the classroom teacher, I would like to interview you three times during the study at a time that would be convenient for you: once at the beginning of the study, mid-way through the study, and again at the conclusion of the study.

- **Literacy Artefacts:** Throughout the study, children's writing, pictures, and other literacy projects may inform the topic of study. If such an artifact is identified, I will ask the child for permission to borrow it. If permission is freely given, the artifact will then be scanned and/or photocopied, and returned to the child at the conclusion of the study or sooner.

Should any research assistants participate in the data collection or analysis stages of this study, they will comply with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants (Please see: http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/gfcpolicymanual/policymanualsection66.cfm). All other research personnel involved in this study will sign a confidentiality agreement to ensure that privacy and anonymity are protected. Further, special considerations will be in place to ensure the safety and well-being of all participants. The therapy dogs participating in this study have extensive experience working in my own Grade 2 classroom with children, and have been registered through the Pet Therapy Society of Northern Alberta. This means that the dogs have obedience training, have been screened for having an appropriate temperament for working with children in the classroom context, are well groomed, and are up to date on all shots and necessary medications. The therapy dogs do not shed. Prior to and immediately following each child's interactions with the therapy dog, they will wash their hands with a hand-sanitizer. The dogs will enter the school after the final bell has rung and the students are all in their classrooms, thus limiting potential contact between the dogs and students not participating in the study. Finally, two dogs have been selected for this study to minimize potential stress on the animals, such that should one dog get tired, the other will be available to take over. The dog that is not in contact with the children will rest in a kennel away from the students, and at no point during the study will a child interact with a dog unsupervised.

All individuals reserve the right to not participate in this study, and are free to withdraw anytime prior to the end of January, 2010, without prejudice. The privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality of all participants will be protected through the use of pseudonyms and through the removal of all identifying information from data collected. All data collected from this study will be kept in a locked space in the researcher's university office for a minimum of five years following completion of the research project, and when appropriate, will be destroyed in a way that ensures confidentiality. Should participants be interested in obtaining a copy of the research findings generated from this study, please contact myself, Lori Friesen, at lfriesen@ualberta.ca or by phone at 780-454-1156 upon completion of this research. Findings resulting from this study may be published in research articles and/or books, and presented at conferences upon its

completion. The data for all uses will be handled in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants as indicated above.

Should you have any questions or concerns about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me, Lori Friesen, via email: lfriesen@ualberta.ca or by phone, 780-454-1156. You may also contact my supervisor at the University of Alberta, Dr. Joyce Bainbridge, at joyce.bainbridge@ualberta.ca, or by phone at the Office of the Associate Dean: 780-492-3751.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751.

Thank you for considering my invitation to participate in this research project.

Cordially,

Lori Friesen
PhD Candidate, Year III
University of Alberta

APPENDIX C
INFORMATION AND CONSENT LETTER FOR THE PARENTS

Date

Dear _____ ,

As was indicated in my initial letter of invitation to participate in this study, the purpose of this research is to explore how children experience literacy learning with a therapy dog in the elementary language arts classroom.

Data for this study will be collected using the following procedures:

- **Video and Audio-taping:** I will be visiting your child's classroom for two mornings each week from October until December with my two registered therapy dogs. During this time, the children will be invited to sign up for individual or small-group text-based oral language activities with myself and with one of the dogs. These sessions will be audio and video-taped, and will be approximately 15 minutes in length. We will be able to accommodate approximately five sessions each morning that we visit.

- **Observations:** For the remainder of the two mornings each week (when not engaged in individual and/or small-group literacy activities), I will observe the children as they engage in regular language arts activities and write anecdotal field notes. Upon the teacher's invitation, the therapy dog and I may be invited to participate in language arts activities as appropriate opportunities arise.

- **Pre-interview Activities**: Pre-interview activities are designed to "support getting-to-know-you conversations with a child, enable the child to teach the researcher about the context of interest, [and] provide the child with the opportunity to recall and select memories to share" (Ellis, 2006, p. 118). For the purposes of this study, the pre-interview activity at the beginning of the study will be the design of "All About Me" posters. Mid-way through the study, the pre-interview activity may take the form of a picture and a paragraph about their classroom before the dog was incorporated into the language arts class, and after. At the conclusion of the study, the pre-interview activity may encourage children to give advice for future classrooms that are considering incorporating a therapy dog into language arts. All pre-interview activities will take place in the regular classroom context under the direct supervision of the classroom teacher, and will connect to the language arts curriculum.

- **Interviews**: As a follow-up to each of the pre-interview activities, several children will be selected in an effort to represent a wide range of literacy skills and attitudes towards literacy within the classroom. These children will be asked if they would like to participate in semi-structured interviews at the beginning of the study, approximately mid-way through the study, and at the end of the study. The interviews will be predominantly child-led, using their pre-interview activities as a springboard for conversation, and each interview will be

approximately a half-hour in length. Your child's teacher will also participate in three interviews during the course of this study.

- **Literacy Artefacts:** Throughout the study, children's writing, pictures, and other literacy projects may inform the topic of study. If such an artifact is identified, I will ask the child for permission to borrow it. If permission is freely given, the artifact will then be scanned and/or photocopied, and returned to the child at the conclusion of the study or sooner.

Should any research assistants participate in the data collection or analysis stages of this study, they will comply with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants (Please see: http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/gfcpolicymanual/policymanualsection66.cfm). All other research personnel involved in this study will sign a confidentiality agreement to ensure that privacy and anonymity are protected. Further, special considerations will be in place to ensure the safety and well-being of all participants. The therapy dogs participating in this study have extensive experience working in my own Grade 2 classroom with children, and have been registered through the Pet Therapy Society of Northern Alberta. This means that the dogs have obedience training, have been screened for having an appropriate temperament for working with children in the classroom context, are well groomed, and are up to date on all shots and necessary medications. The therapy dogs do not shed. Prior to and immediately following each child's interactions with the therapy dog, they will wash their hands with a hand-sanitizer. The dogs will enter the school after the final bell has rung and the students are all in their classrooms, thus limiting potential contact between the dogs and students not participating in the study. Finally, two dogs have been selected for this study to minimize potential stress on the animals, such that should one dog get tired, the other will be available to take over. The dog that is not in contact with the children will rest in a kennel away from the students, and at no point during the study will a child interact with a dog unsupervised.

All individuals reserve the right to not participate in this study, and are free to withdraw prior to the end of January, 2010, without prejudice. Should an individual choose to withdraw from the study, any previously collected data involving that individual will be removed. The privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality of all participants will be protected through the use of pseudonyms and through the removal of all identifying information from data collected. All data collected from this study will be kept in a locked space in the researcher's university office for a minimum of five years following completion of the research project, and when appropriate, will be destroyed in a way that ensures confidentiality. Should participants be interested in obtaining a copy of the research findings generated from this study, please contact me, Lori Friesen, at lfriesen@ualberta.ca or by phone at 780-454-1156 upon completion of this research. Findings resulting from this study may be published in research articles and/or books, and presented at conferences upon its completion. The data for all uses will be handled in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants as indicated above.

Should you have any questions or concerns about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me, Lori Friesen, via email: lfriesen@ualberta.ca or by phone, 780-454-1156. You may also contact my supervisor at the University of Alberta, Dr. Joyce Bainbridge, at joyce.bainbridge@ualberta.ca, or by phone at the Office of the Associate Dean: 780-492-3751.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751.

Two copies of this letter are provided: one copy to be signed and returned and one for you to keep for your own records.

I, _____ hereby consent for
(print name of parent/legal guardian)

_____ to participate in this study with Lori Friesen.
(print full name of student)

- I understand that my participation and my child's participation are voluntary and that we are free to withdraw from the study at any time prior to the end of January, 2010 without prejudice.
- I understand that the researcher will be observing and participating in my child's language arts classroom with her therapy dogs from October 2009 until the end of December 2009 for two mornings each week.
- I consent for the researcher to take photos and video record my child's interactions with the therapy dog, and I understand that these photos and videos may be included in the researcher's dissertation, scholarly publications, and presentations.
- My child's name will be removed and pseudonyms will be used for any photos or videos included in the above-mentioned writing and presentations.
- I consent for my child to participate in pre-interview activities and in audio-recorded interviews.
- I understand that any literacy artefacts (children's writing, pictures, etc) that may be borrowed with permission from my child will be returned to my child at the conclusion of the study.

Please check each of the following:

Does your child have severe allergies to animals? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Is your child afraid of animals? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Comments:

_____
_____
_____
_____

Signature of Parent/Legal Guardian: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX D
INFORMATION AND CONSENT LETTER FOR THE TEACHER

Date

Dear _____ ,

As was indicated in my initial letter of invitation to participate in this study, the purpose of this research is to explore how children experience literacy learning with a therapy dog in the elementary language arts classroom. This research will be conducted in partial fulfillment for the degree of PhD in Elementary Education, Language and Literacy. This study will not interfere with the regular teaching and learning in your language arts classroom.

Data for this study will be collected using the following procedures:

- **Video and Audio-taping:** I would like to visit your classroom for two mornings each week from October until December with my two registered therapy dogs. During this time, the children will be invited to sign up for individual or small-group text-based oral language activities with myself and with one of the dogs. These sessions will be audio and video-taped, and will be approximately 15 minutes in length. We will be able to accommodate approximately five sessions each morning that we visit.

- **Observations:** For the remainder of the two mornings each week (when not engaged in individual and/or small-group literacy activities), I will observe the children as they engage in regular language arts activities and write anecdotal field notes. Upon the teacher's invitation, the therapy dog and I may be invited to participate in language arts activities as appropriate opportunities arise.

- **Pre-interview Activities**: Pre-interview activities are designed to "support getting-to-know-you conversations with a child, enable the child to teach the researcher about the context of interest, [and] provide the child with the opportunity to recall and select memories to share" (Ellis, 2006, p. 118). For the purposes of this study, the pre-interview activity at the beginning of the study will be the design of "All About Me" posters. Mid-way through the study, the pre-interview activity may take the form of a picture and a paragraph about their classroom before the dog was incorporated into the language arts class, and after. At the conclusion of the study, the pre-interview activity may encourage children to give advice for future classrooms that are considering incorporating a therapy dog into language arts. All pre-interview activities will take place in the regular classroom context under the direct supervision of the classroom teacher, and will connect to the language arts curriculum.

- **Interviews**: As a follow-up to each of the pre-interview activities, several children will be selected in an effort to represent a wide range of literacy skills and attitudes towards literacy within the classroom. These children will be asked if they would like to participate in semi-structured interviews at the beginning of

the study, approximately mid-way through the study, and at the end of the study. The interviews will be predominantly child-led, using their pre-interview activities as a springboard for conversation, and each interview will be approximately a half-hour in length.

- **Literacy Artefacts:** Throughout the study, children's writing, pictures, and other literacy projects may inform the topic of study. If such an artifact is identified, I will ask the child for permission to borrow it. If permission is freely given, the artifact will then be scanned and/or photocopied, and returned to the child at the conclusion of the study or sooner.

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All individuals reserve the right to not participate in this study, and are free to withdraw prior to the end of January, 2010 without prejudice. Should an individual choose to withdraw from the study, any previously collected data involving that individual will be removed. The privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality of all participants will be protected through the use of pseudonyms and through the removal of all identifying information from data collected. All data collected from this study will be kept in a locked space in the researcher's university office for a minimum of five years following completion of the research project, and when appropriate, will be destroyed in a way that ensures confidentiality. Should participants be interested in obtaining a copy of the research findings generated from this study, please contact me, Lori Friesen, at lfriesen@ualberta.ca or by phone at 780-454-1156 upon completion of this research. Findings resulting from this study may be published in research articles and/or books, and presented at conferences upon its completion. The data for all uses will be handled in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants as indicated above.

Should you have any questions or concerns about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me, Lori Friesen, via email: lfriesen@ualberta.ca or by phone, 780-454-1156. You may also contact my supervisor at the University of Alberta, Dr. Joyce Bainbridge,

at joyce.bainbridge@ualberta.ca, or by phone at the Office of the Associate Dean: 780-492-3751.

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Two copies of this letter are provided: one copy to be signed and returned and one for you to keep for your own records.

I, _____ hereby consent to participate in this study with Lori Friesen.
(print full name)

- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time prior to the end of January 2010 without prejudice.
- I understand that the researcher will be observing and participating in my language arts classes with her therapy dogs from October 2009 until the end of December 2009 for two mornings each week.
- I consent for the researcher to take photos and video record my interactions with the therapy dog, and I understand that these photos and videos may be included in the researcher's dissertation, scholarly publications, and presentations.
- I understand that my name will be removed and pseudonyms will be used for any photos or videos included in the above-mentioned writing and presentations.
- I consent to participate in three pre-interview activities and in three audio-recorded interviews.
- I understand that any literacy artefacts (the children's or my writing, pictures, etc) that may be borrowed with permission from the author will be returned at the conclusion of the study.

Teacher's Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX E
LETTER OF ASSENT FOR THE STUDENTS

October 1, 2009

Dear _____,

My name is Lori Friesen and I am a student at the University of Alberta. I would like to come into your classroom to learn about what it's like to practice reading with a therapy dog.

For two mornings each week, I will come into your classroom with Tango and Sparky, my dogs. When we are in your class, you can sign up to read or write with them for about 15 minutes.

For the rest of the morning, Tango, Sparky, and I will help out in your classroom and participate in some of your language arts classes.

If you would like to read and write with Tango, Sparky, and I, please fill in the blanks below and sign your name.

Thank you!
Tango, Sparky, and Lori

My name is _____ .

I understand that Lori and her therapy dogs (Tango and Sparky) will be in my classroom for two mornings each week from October until December 2009. I would like to do language arts activities with Tango, Sparky, and Lori.

_____
(Child's Signature)

APPENDIX F
PERMISSION TO TAKE PHOTOGRAPHS AND VIDEOTAPE

Name of person to be photographed and/or videotaped:

_____

(please print)

I am the person or the parent/legal guardian of the person named above.
I understand that a researcher from the University of Alberta is proposing to take photographs of, videotape and make captions identifying my child for the purpose of research.

I understand that photographs and video recordings will be used for two different purposes:

1. Individual photos of the children will be taken to assist the researcher in learning the students' names and will be destroyed thereafter.

2. Other images may be taken of the children interacting with the therapy dog which may be used in the researcher's dissertation, research reports, scholarly publications (including books) and in presentations at academic conferences. These photographs will not reveal my child's identity. In captions and in discussions about the images, only pseudonyms will be used.

My signature below indicates that I consent* to the above-described collection, use and disclosure of photographs and captions.

Name of person consenting: _____
(please print)

_____ _____

Signature of participant

Signature of parent/guardian if participant is a minor

Date: _____

*I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time prior to November 13, 2009 by contacting the researcher, Lori Friesen, at 780-454-1156 or by email at lfriesen@ualberta.ca.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751.

APPENDIX G
PERMISSION TO USE THE PARTICIPANTS' WORK

I understand that a researcher from the University of Alberta is requesting to use my child's art/school work for the purpose of research. Original samples will be photographed, photocopied, or scanned and returned to the participant in a timely manner if requested. I understand that images of this work may be used in the researcher's dissertation, research reports, and/or scholarly publications, or in presentations at scholarly conferences.

_____ I understand that in discussions about the work, a pseudonym will be used.

FURTHER,

_____ I request return of original artifact(s) to my child's school

By signing below, I consent* for my/my child's work to be used as stipulated above.

_____ _____
Participant printed name Participant signature

_____
Parent/guardian printed name if participant is a minor.

_____
Parent/guardian signature if participant is a minor.

*I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time prior to January 30, 2009 by contacting the researcher, Lori Friesen, at 780-454-1156 or by email at lfriesen@ualberta.ca

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751.

APPENDIX H
CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT FOR THE CRITICAL FRIEND

I, _____, as a critical friend, have been asked to view and comment upon audio and/or video data from this study.

I agree to -

1. keep all the research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than the *Researcher(s)*.

2. keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) secure while it is in my possession.

3. return all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) to the *Researcher(s)* when I have completed the research tasks.

4. after consulting with the *Researcher(s),* erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the *Researcher(s)* (e.g., information stored on computer hard drive).

5. other (specify).

_____	_____	_____
(Print Name)	(Signature)	(Date)

Researcher(s)

_____	_____	_____
(Print Name)	(Signature)	(Date)

APPENDIX I
CONSENT LETTER TO INTERVIEW PARENTS

December 1, 2009

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Lori Friesen, and I am a PhD candidate in the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta. As you already know, I have been participating in your child's classroom over the past seven weeks to explore how children experience literacy learning with a therapy dog. As an extension of this work, I would like to invite you to participate in a semi-structured interview to gain your perspective on how your child is experiencing these literacy sessions with me and the therapy dogs. If you would be interested in participating in an interview, please return this signed form to your child's teacher.

Please know that you reserve the right to not participate in this study, and that you are free to withdraw prior to the end of January, 2010, without prejudice. Should you choose to withdraw from the study, I will remove any previously collected data involving you. Your privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality will be protected through the use of pseudonyms and through the removal of all identifying information from collected data. All data collected from this study will be kept in a locked space in my university or home office for a minimum of five years following completion of the research project, and when appropriate, will be destroyed in a way that ensures confidentiality. If you are interested in obtaining a copy of the research findings generated from this study, please contact me, Lori Friesen, at lfriesen@ualberta.ca or by phone at 780-454-1156 upon completion of this research. Findings resulting from this study may be published in research articles and/or books, and presented at conferences upon its completion. The data for all uses will be handled in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants as indicated above.

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Should you have any questions or concerns about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me, Lori Friesen, via email: lfriesen@ualberta.ca or by phone, 780-454-1156. You may also contact my supervisor at the University of Alberta, Dr. Joyce Bainbridge, at joyce.bainbridge@ualberta.ca, or by phone at the Office of the Associate Dean: 780-492-3751.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board

(EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751.

Two copies of this letter are provided: one copy to be signed and returned and one for you to keep for your own records.

I, _____hereby consent to participate in this study with Lori Friesen.
(print full name)

- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time prior to the end of January, 2010 without prejudice.

- I consent to participate in audio-recorded interviews with the researcher, Lori Friesen.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please check the time(s) you would be available to come to Wye Elementary School (we will be meeting privately in Mr. _____ office) on <u>Wednesday, December 16th</u> for an interview:

☐	8:30-9:00	☐	12:30-1:00
☐	9:00-9:30	☐	1:00-1:30
☐	9:30-10:00	☐	1:30-2:00
☐	10:00-10:30	☐	2:00-2:30
☐	10:30-11:00	☐	2:30-3:00
☐	11:00-11:30	☐	3:00-3:30
☐	11:30-12:00		

Alternatively, if you are not available during the day on Wednesday, December 16th but you would like to participate in an audio-recorded phone interview, please indicate your preferred time(s) and date(s):

☐ Monday, December 14th Time(s) _____

☐ Tuesday, December 15th Time(s): _____

☐ Thursday, December 17th Time(s): _____

☐ Other: _____ Time(s): _____

Phone number where you can be contacted in the evening:

_____

I will send a note home with your child confirming your interview time. I am looking forward to meeting you!

Sincerely,

Lori Friesen

Department of Elementary Education
University of Alberta

APPENDIX J
PRE-INTERVIEW ACTIVITY SAMPLES

Beginning of the Study:

Below is a sample of the getting-to-know-you t-shirt activity which students completed prior to the beginning of the study, and which the students brought to their first interviews. The student names have been blocked out to protect the identity of the participants.

Mid-way through the Study

Approximately half-way through the study, the students were invited to write letters to the dog(s) and I, and to draw pictures of them reading and/or writing with the dogs. These letters and pictures served as the springboard for our conversations during mid-round interviews.

Dear [redacted] Tango,

I like you. Are you a girl? You are small. Why do you like going for walks? I like you a lot. Why are you white? Tango. Tango. Dancied. Dancied. Every Tuesday, Thursday I like when you see me. I feeill happy. I love writing with you. You are the best dog ever. You are brilliant at shacking a paw. What kind of dog are you? Why do you like toys? You are very nice to me. I wrote you a song. Dogo. Dogo. Dogs are great. They are funny [redacted]tch. Tango. Tango. You are great.

Love,

Dancie

P.S. I think you are great.

Towards the End of the Study

During the last week of the study, the students were invited to draw and write about what it was like for them to read and write with the dogs during the beginning, middle, and end of the study. Below is one child's representation of her experience.

APPENDIX K
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR THE STUDENTS

Beginning of the Study

Say: I just wanted to ask you some questions about what it's like to have Tango and Sparky in your classroom. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions? Is it ok if I tape-record what we talk about?

1. So what do you think about having Tango and Sparky in your classroom?

2. What has been your favourite thing about having Tango and Sparky in your classroom so far? What have you liked the most? What did you like about it so much?

3. Is there anything that you don't like about having Tango and Sparky in your room?

4. In school, what are some of your favourite things to do? Which subjects do you like most? Can you tell me about what you like about that subject?

5. What do you not like about school? What are your least favourite subjects? Can you tell me about what you don't like about that subject?

6. What are some things that you believe you are really good at, either in school or out of school?

7. What are some things that you'd like to work on or that you'd like to change?

8. Do you think that Tango and Sparky can help you with any of those things?

9. If you could have one wish, what do you think you might wish for?

10. What's the best thing about being your age? What's the hardest thing about being your age?

Mid-way Through the Study

1. While looking at the child's picture together, note:
   - Would you like to tell me about your picture?
   - I see _____ here.
   - Can you tell me more about….
   - Is there a reason why you have chosen to draw _____ here?
   - What do you think Tango and Sparky are thinking about here?
   - What do you think Tango/Sparky's job is when you're reading/writing with them?
   - What is Lori's job?
   - What is your job?
   - Do you have a favourite dog?

2. Let's imagine that you are talking to someone who just came into the classroom and asked about what is going on at the back of the room with Tango and Sparky. Can you tell me about what happens when you come to read or write with Tango or Sparky? Can you take me through one session?

3. So what is it like for you, reading or writing with Tango, Sparky, and Lori?

4. Think about other times when you do reading and writing at school or at home. How is reading and writing with Tango, Sparky, and Lori similar to or different from that?

5. I want you to think about if it was just me reading and writing with you each week (without Tango and Sparky). How would it be similar or different? Would you still sign up?

6. When your name is drawn each week to sign up to read with Tango or Sparky, what is the most important thing to you?

    - Getting your first choice of dog?
    - Who your partner is?
    - The day (Tues or Thurs)? or…?

7. What is your favourite part about reading and writing with Tango, Sparky, and I?

8. Are there things you don't like?

9. Do you have pets at home?

10. What is your favourite subject at school? Why do you like it so much?

11. What is your least favourite subject at school? What do you not like about it?

12. Is there anything else you would like me to know? Do you have any questions for me?
    Thank you!

<u>End of the Study</u>

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the worst and 10 being the best, how do you feel about reading and writing with Tango and Sparky? Why do you feel this way?

2. Do you think that other kids might like to read and write with dogs in their classrooms? Why or why not?

3. Do you feel like Tango and Sparky have helped you in any way?

4. How do you feel when you are with the dogs? Is this different than at other times at school? If so, how?

5. Do you think that Tango and Sparky like to come to your classroom? Do you think that they are going to miss you? If so, what do you think they will miss the most?

6. I've noticed that some students really like to pet and cuddle with the dogs. Do you? Why do you think they like to do that? How does it make you feel? What does it remind you of?

7. I've noticed that some of you bring stuffed animals to school and keep them on your desks. How come you do that? How is reading and writing with Tango and Sparky the same or different?

8. Some of the kids have told me that they like to read to their own pets. Do you? Why do you like to read to them? Did you read to your pets before you met Tango and Sparky and started reading with them?

9. How do you feel about the dogs leaving your classroom? Do you think you might miss them? If yes, what do you think you might miss the most?

10. What advice do you think you would give to other students about having a dog (or dogs) in your classroom to read and write with?

11. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

12. Do you mind if I come back and ask you some more questions later on, after Christmas?

13. Thanks!

APPENDIX L
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR THE TEACHER

Beginning of the Study

1. What do you perceive might be the benefits of this study for the students?

2. Do you perceive that you may benefit in any way?

3. What do you perceive might be the challenges of having the dogs and their researcher in your classroom?

4. What do you see as your role in the study?

5. What do you think the children might learn from participating in this study?

6. Based on the interactions that you've had with me and the dogs so far, are there any questions or concerns that you have? Is there anything that isn't working well for you that you think we might need to change?

Mid-way Through the Study

1. What has it been like for you as a teacher having the dogs and I in your classroom so far?

2. Has anything surprised you about having the dogs and I as part of your classroom?

3. Has anything surprised you about the children's response to having the dogs in your room? (i.e. specific comments that children have made, their reactions to literacy activities related to the dogs, etc)

4. What do you perceive have been the benefits of having the dogs and I in your classroom over the past five weeks? For the students? For you?

5. What have been the negative aspects of having the dogs and I in your classroom? Is there anything that isn't working well for you that you would like to change?

6. What do you feel the children are learning through their participation in this study?

7. Have you noticed any changes in the children that you might attribute to having the dogs and I in your classroom? If possible, please give examples.

    - Socially; ie) the way that children interact
    - emotionally
    - attitudes
    - literacy skills/learning

8. What do you think has been the significance of these experiences for individual children in particular? For the class as a whole?

9. Do you perceive that there would be a difference in the children's experience/interest/enthusiasm if it were just me (without the dogs) reading and writing with the students each week?

10. When the children sign up to read with the dogs each week, is there clearly a favourite dog? Have you reminded students that they can choose not to participate?

11. Seating arrangement in the classroom – are there children who are typically off task?

12. Would it be all right if I came in to observe the students during independent reading time sometime?

13. Interviewing a few of the parents to get their perspective within the next couple of weeks….

14. Any questions? Concerns? Suggestions?

End of the Study

1. I've noticed that some of the children bring stuffed animals to school and keep them on their desks. Can you tell me more about this?

2. What do you perceive have been the benefits of having the therapy dogs and I in your room during language arts classes?

3. What have been the negative aspects of having us in your classroom?

4. Would you invite a therapy dog into your classroom again? Why or why not?

5. You mentioned in our last interview that you feel like having us in your classroom has just 'accelerated' what you are already doing in your classroom with reading and writing. Can you tell me more about that?

6. Have you noticed any changes in the children that you might attribute to having participated in this study? Socially, emotionally, and/or academically?

7. How do you feel that this program is similar to or different than other programs you have incorporated into your teaching over the years?

8. One of the criticisms of animal-assisted reading programs is that the novelty of the experience wears off, often after the first month. Do you feel that this has been the case in your classroom? Please explain. What factors do you think may have contributed to the students' enthusiasm or lack thereof?

9. What advice would you give to a teacher considering a program such as this for their own classroom?

10. Do you anticipate any long-term benefits for the students in your class as a result of their participation in this study? Please explain.

11. Do you think that you have learned anything as a result of participating in this study that you may apply to your own literacy teaching in the future?

12. Once I have a chance to analyze the data I've collected from this study, I'll likely have some more questions. Is it all right if I contact you again sometime after Christmas (in January/February)?

13. Thank you.

APPENDIX M
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR THE PARENTS

End of the Study

- Thank you for coming. Is it all right if I record this interview?
- So as you know, I've been participating in your child's grade 2 classroom with my two therapy dogs, Tango and Sparky, over the past 10 weeks, and for purposes of research, I wanted to ask you some questions about how your child has experienced this. Before we get started, I just want to remind you that in any writing or presentations that I do which includes information from this interview, I will use a pseudonym to ensure your privacy and anonymity, and I will remove any information that might identify you.

1. Can you tell me if your child has said anything about reading and writing with Tango, Sparky and I at home? Has your child said anything that stood out for you? Surprised you?

2. Do you think that your child perceives reading to an animal as being different than reading to an adult? If so, in what way?

3. How does your child feel about reading and writing in general? Do you think that working with the dogs and I each week has affected how your child feels about reading and writing in any way? Why?

4. Does your family have a pet? If so, does your child read with or to his or her own pet at home? (If so, when did your child start reading to his or her pet?)

5. Do you think that your child has benefited from these sessions in any other way? (Socially, emotionally) Please explain.

6. Do you perceive that there have been any negative aspects of participating in these sessions for your child?

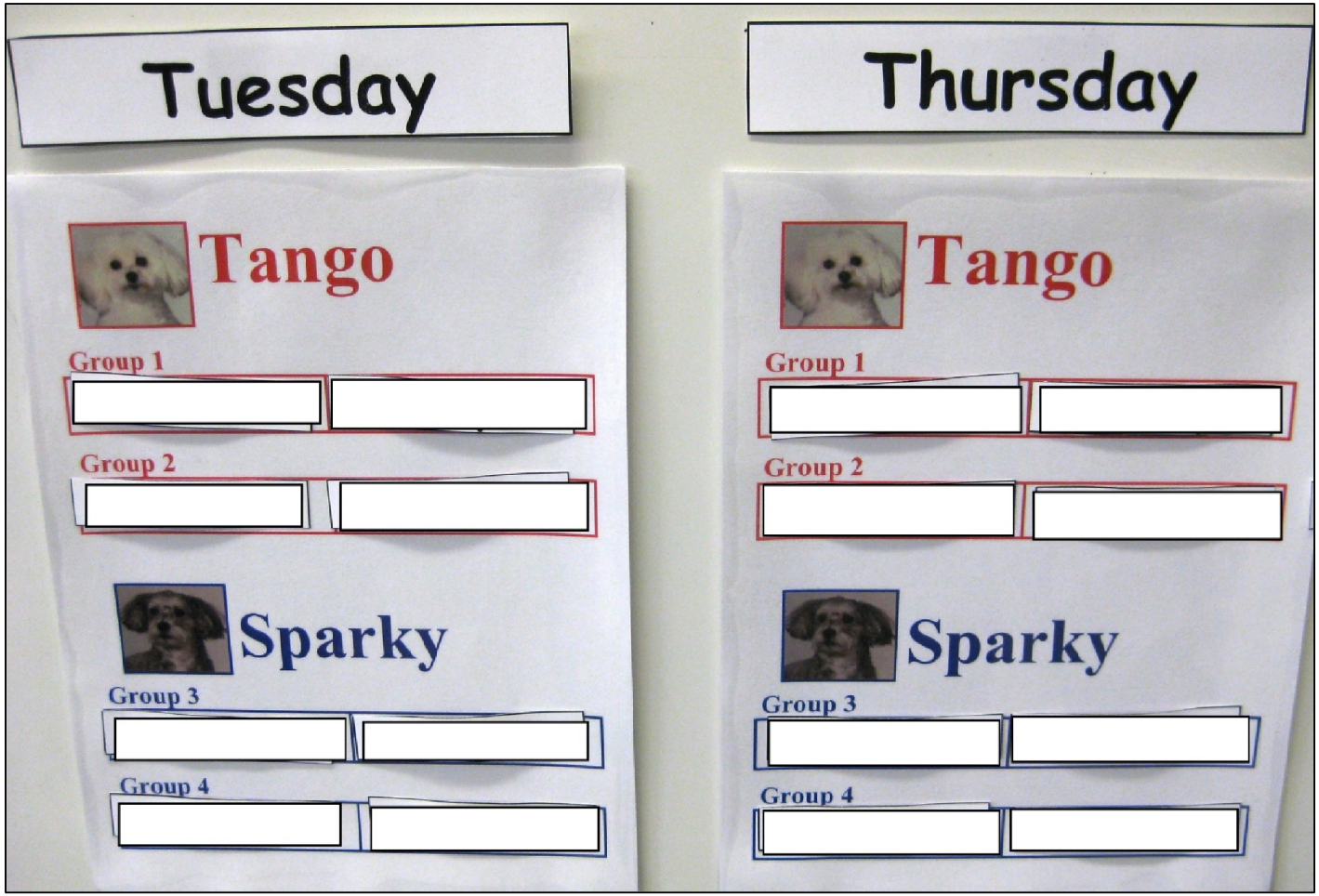
7. What do you think might be the significance of participating in these sessions for your child at school?

8. Based on your child's experience, would you recommend that other classrooms participate in a program like this one?

9. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me that I haven't asked you about?

10. Do you have any questions for me? Thank you for your time.

APPENDIX N
WEEKLY STUDENT SIGN-UP SHEETS FOR THE CLASSROOM


Tuesday
Tango
Group 1
Group 2
Sparky
Group 3
Group 4
Thursday
Tango
Group 1
Group 2
Sparky
Group 3
Group 4

APPENDIX O
WEEKLY STUDENT SIGN-UP SHEETS FOR THE RESEARCHER

Week of: _____

Tuesday

Tango	**8:50 – 9:10**		
Tango	**9:10 – 9:30**		
Sparky	**9:30 – 9:50**		
Sparky	**9:50 – 10:10**		

Thursday

Tango	**8:50 – 9:10**		
Tango	**9:10 – 9:30**		
Sparky	**9:30 – 9:50**		
Sparky	**9:50 – 10:10**		

APPENDIX P
PRESS RELEASES ASSOCIATED WITH THIS RESEARCH STUDY

Literacy going to the dogs

Express News

By Jamie Hanlon September 30, 2010

Lori Friesen uses "literacy dogs" to stimulate children's love of literacy.

(Edmonton) University of Alberta researcher Lori Friesen's classroom assistants are very attentive, love to listen to children read and can keep their composure in a classroom full of energetic Grade 2 students. However, her assistants are more likely to lick the students' faces than give them a gold star.

Friesen, a PhD student in the Faculty of Education, says her work with her "literacy dogs," Tango and Sparky, in one city-area classroom yielded some highly positive successes for the children and her research.

In Friesen's research, children signed up for weekly reading or writing sessions with her and one of the dogs. During that time, they would read student-selected, high-quality children's literature, or work on the student's writing.

Friesen said the small group work seemed to ease some children's trepidation when it came to reading aloud. Using picture cues or clues to provide context in the story, Friesen helped students learn new words or overcome challenges with other words—lessons, she says, the students grasped and applied to try and help the dogs understand new words as well. She said that the students perceived her dogs as "little buddies," whose presence encouraged the students to read aloud.

However, Friesen, whose findings will be published in an upcoming edition of the journal *Language & Literacy*, is reticent to call her work "animal-assisted therapy," since she says the notion does not accurately reflect what she and her dogs do when working with the children. Friesen notes that any classroom activities she and her dogs undertake have to align with curriculum outcomes.

"This is a goal-oriented activity; we're not doing therapy with children," said Friesen. "Animal-assisted literacy learning is about how children experience literacy learning in a safe, supportive, effective, meaningful and exciting learning environment."

Further, quiet opportunities to cuddle with the dogs while working closely with their classmates and with a caring adult seemed to provide a special form of support for these children's classroom literacy learning.

Friesen notes that Grade 2 is a crucial time period for students developing the potential to become lifelong readers, or to turn away from reading. However, the dogs seemed to be an important catalyst in the children's motivation to display and engage in a committed habit of reading.

"One-third of the class began reading to or writing with their own dogs at home, and were choosing to read when otherwise they wouldn't," she explained. "Their parents reported that these children hadn't used to talk about school at home, but now when they got to the dinner table, the parents heard all about Tango's favourite books—it was the first time they actually knew what their children were reading at school."

Friesen said the impact this work had on the children was remarkable. She also noted that the reaction from parents was positive in terms of how motivated

children were to read with the dogs. In fact, one child's parents noted that he refused to go on a family vacation because it meant he was going to miss a turn. Many of the parents also noted that if their child was lacking motivation to go to school, if they were reminded that Tango and Sparky were going to be there, they'd be at the door in no time at all.

"The classroom teacher, as well as many of the parents, noticed positive changes in the children's reading behaviours and an increase in their confidence," she said. "The children were constantly learning and engaging with text in new ways. This is what literacy should be about for children."

Puppy love: Building Confidence One Bark at a Time

By Martha Worboy, CANWEST News Service, March 10, 2010

When Dawson turned seven years old, his mother Becky Brunton decided it was time for the world to see what he could do. Diagnosed at 18 months with autism, Dawson didn't speak and, according to his mother, people assumed he would never attain any level of independence.

Enter Roscoe, a chocolate lab specially trained as a service dog to work with autistic children.

Bringing Roscoe into their home in Barrie, Ont., challenged Dawson to think for himself and gave him new confidence to take on responsibility, says Brunton.

Now 14 and working with his third service dog, Dawson has developed limited verbal skills, can walk down the halls at school independently and cross the street alone.

"Roscoe opened the door for people to notice the power of an individual with autism," Brunton says.

Janine Walters, a dog trainer at National Service Dogs in Cambridge, Ont. -- a facility that pioneered the training of service dogs for autistic children in Canada -

- says the dogs have a way of grounding the children so they don't feel as overwhelmed by daily tasks.

"It gives a child a sense of pride and independence," Walters says. "They no longer have to walk through a mall hanging on to their parent's jacket."

Walters says becoming a service dog involves an intensive four to six month obedience training during which they are taught to use a vest/belt system that will eventually attach them to an autistic child.

When the dogs are finished their NSD training they have to be "bomb proof", Walters says, which means they must be obedient, calm and have no fear of people, objects or loud noises.

The service dogs' positive impact on Dawson seems typical of many autistic children's experiences, according to a recent Canadian study by researchers Cindy Adams and Kristen Burrows.

Most children with the service dogs demonstrated decreased social anxiety, increased calmness and a reduced number of "meltdowns", according to the findings. (Many people with autism have difficulty with social interaction and experience higher anxiety levels).

"The dogs are stable and warm," says Adams, a professor of veterinary medicine at the University of Calgary. And, she adds, through their proximity to the child, whether in the home or in the community, routine tasks such as getting ready for bed or going for a car ride became more manageable.

Increasingly, dogs are being employed to help the development of children with a variety of special needs.

A new study conducted by Lori Friesen, a doctoral candidate at the University of Alberta, looks at the benefits of literacy learning with a therapy dog.

Where service dogs undergo intensive training to assist a disabled person, therapy dogs — owned by volunteers — provide therapeutic interaction under the guidance of a service organization, according to therapyanimals.org.

Although still analyzing her results, Friesen observed that many children in a Grade 2 class felt motivated when they had the option to read to a dog.

In of a class of 18, each child voluntarily signed up for three months to participate in the program.

While careful not to draw too many conclusions at this stage, Friesen suggests the dogs offered a nurturing reading experience. Some children who lacked confidence became more confident in their reading abilities.

"They (the children) may feel they've been heard or understood," Friesen says. "The dogs are not judgmental. They take the focus off the child's struggles and redirect it into something fun."

Friesen's initial conclusions seem to be supported by the positive outcomes of the Paws 4 Reading program using therapy dogs in North Vancouver.

"It's going gangbusters," Brown says about the success of her program. Similar programs operate in the U.S., Australia, Italy and India.

Volunteers from Paws 4 Reading visit elementary schools every week for an hour and selected children can read to a dog for 20 minutes at a time.

Brown says the dogs seem to work magic on the kids.

"The dogs are soft, furry and look at them (the kids) like they're the best reader they've ever heard," Brown says.

Even a boy with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder who usually can't sit still can rub Emma, Brown's black lab, while reading fluently for 20 minutes.

"Animals provide unconditional love and they don't judge you. They'll accept anybody as long as they're nice," says Eileen Bona, a psychologist who provides therapy to children with behavioural challenges and special needs.

For the past seven years Bona has held her practice at a ranch near Edmonton, Alta., where she pairs her patients with rescued animals as part of a therapy process. Bona has not only seen dogs but also cats, horses, rabbits and even llamas contribute to breakthroughs with her patients.

Bona suggests it comes down to something called the biophilia theory.

"It says we've evolved from nature and we're more relaxed in a natural setting," Bona says.

"We learn better when we're in a relaxed state and animals represent nature.

Canines in the classroom

KRISTY BROWNLEE, QMI AGENCY, Edmonton Sun, September 30, 2010

University of Alberta researcher Lori Friesen and her literacy dogs, Sparky and Tango, help Grade 2 students read at a Sherwood Park school last fall. (Submitted)

Reading hasn't gone to the dogs.

A University of Alberta researcher, studying animal-assisted literacy learning, says having canines in classrooms improves children's reading and writing skills.

Last fall, Lori Friesen brought a pair of trained Maltese poodles, Tango and Sparky, to a Sherwood Park elementary school.

In a Grade 2 class over 10 weeks, pairs of students volunteered to read or write at the rear of the classroom with the dogs and Friesen as a mentor.

"They were really excited, really enthusiastic," said Friesen.

As the kids read to the dogs, they would pet the critters, and it made the students more focused, she said.

The teacher said their writing and reading improved and became more imaginative.

Rottweilers to papillons are used in city schools, libraries and even youth jails to encourage literacy.

"They have a captive audience so to speak," said Janice Rowley, president of Pet Therapy Society of Northern Alberta which offers the Paws for a Story program.

"If reading to a dog, or a cat, or a bunny rabbit helps, I think it's a good thing. They know the animal cannot give criticism. They feel a lot more at ease," said Rowley.

Friesen hopes to speak at teachers conventions and do further research on four-legged critters in classrooms, and even among English as a second language students.

Animals can help kids feel more part of the group, she said.

"It breaks down barriers." Literacy-encouraging dogs are already used in classrooms in the U.S., China and Australia.

Puppies the newest learning tool for grade two

Aspen Zettel, Metro News, Edmonton, October 11, 2010

PUBLIC AFFAIRS UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA/SUBMITTED

Lori Friesen and her dog Tango in an Edmonton classroom.

"What I started to notice was some of the kids brought books to read to Tango. I noticed some of the boys arguing over which books Tango liked the most."
- Lori Friesen

For one lucky grade two classroom, the newest students, Tango and Sparky are by far the most popular.

Lori Friesen is a University of Alberta researcher who made the connection between a love of reading and writing and dogs, and has implemented her two dogs, Tango and Sparky into the learning process.

Friesen was a grade two teacher before getting her PhD, and often brought her dog Tango to class as a reward to students for good behaviour. Each child would have 10 minutes of quiet time with the dog.

“What I started to notice was some of the kids brought books to read to Tango,” said Friesen. “I noticed some of the boys arguing over which books Tango liked the most.”

Her class gave her the inspiration to find the science behind such a strong response to canine assisted learning. While earning her PhD, Friesen began a weekly research course for a small group of students, bringing Tango to the class and facilitating their time with him.

Friesen interviewed the children after the experiment to find out what they were getting from this activity. “They’re the ones teaching the dog, they’re the ones in charge. They don’t really have that in the regular classroom,” said Friesen.

Classroom Canines Stimulate Children's Love of Literacy

Science News, ScienceDaily (Sep. 30, 2010) — University of Alberta researcher Lori Friesen's classroom assistants are very attentive, love to listen to children read and can keep their composure in a classroom full of energetic Grade 2 students. However, her assistants are more likely to lick the students' faces than give them a gold star.

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Friesen said the small group work seemed to ease some children's trepidation when it came to reading aloud. Using picture cues or clues to provide context in the story, Friesen helped students learn new words or

overcome challenges with other words -- lessons, she says, the students grasped and applied to try and help the dogs understand new words as well. She said that the students perceived her dogs as "little buddies," whose presence encouraged the students to read aloud.

However, Friesen, whose findings will be published in an upcoming edition of the journal *Language & Literacy*, is reticent to call her work "animal-assisted therapy," since she says the notion does not accurately reflect what she and her dogs do when working with the children.

Friesen notes that any classroom activities she and her dogs undertake have to align with curriculum outcomes. "This is a goal-oriented activity; we're not doing therapy with children," said Friesen. "Animal-assisted literacy learning is about how children experience literacy learning in a safe, supportive, effective, meaningful and exciting learning environment."

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"One-third of the class began reading to or writing with their own dogs at home, and were choosing to read when otherwise they wouldn't," she explained. "Their parents reported that these children hadn't used to talk about school at home, but now when they got to the dinner table, the parents heard all about Tango's favourite books -- it was the first time they actually knew what their children were reading at school."

Friesen said the impact this work had on the children was remarkable. She also noted that the reaction from parents was positive in terms of how motivated children were to read with the dogs. In fact, one child's parents noted that he refused to go on a family vacation because it meant he was going to miss a turn. Many of the parents also noted that if their child was lacking motivation to go to school, if they were reminded that Tango and Sparky were going to be there, they'd be at the door in no time at all.

"The classroom teacher, as well as many of the parents, noticed positive changes in the children's reading behaviours and an increase in their confidence," she said. "The children were constantly learning and engaging with text in new ways. This is what literacy should be about for children."

Literacy Dogs: Classroom Canines Boost Love Of Books

Science 2.0

By News Staff | October 1st 2010 12:05 AM |

It may be just a coolness factor for kids, but one classroom in Canada is getting a big boost in reading thanks to canine teaching assistants.

University of Alberta researcher Lori Friesen's says one Alberta classroom showed positive success when small children signed up for weekly reading or writing sessions with her and one of her dogs. During that time, they would read children's literature or work on the student's writing.

Friesen said the small group work seemed to ease some children's trepidation when it came to reading aloud. Using picture cues or clues to provide context in the story, Friesen helped students learn new words or overcome challenges with other words—lessons, she says, the students grasped and applied to try and help the dogs understand new words as well.

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Japanese Magazine: Aiken no tomo (Friends of Dogs)

子ども教育に ワンちゃんが手助け

警察犬に、盲導犬、そして介助犬など、今やあらゆる分野でワンちゃんたちは活躍しています。近年では医療の面でもセラピー・ドッグが社会的にも認められるようになりました。そんな中で「子どもたちへの教育」という分野でもワンちゃんたちが注目を集めています。親なら誰しも関心の深い子ども教育。その最先端の研究をご紹介します。

文・写真：Todo

お子様がいらっしゃる方 必読!

犬といっしょにいれば、学力もアップ!

小学2年生の教室に、犬を導入して、「読み書き能力をアップさせよう」という試みが、現在カナダはアルバータ州のある小学校で行われている。犬を介在させた子どもたちの読書能力向上というのは、すでにアメリカで10年以上前から実践されており、小学校のみならず、図書館の児童書コーナーでも行われてきた。アルバータ州の試みは、犬が児童の学習において、どんな風に効果的なのか、を単なる体験談としてではなく、初めて科学的に、そして学問的に考察している、という点で興味深い。

この研究を行っているのは、アルバータ大学読み書き能力研究センターの研究者ロリ・フリーセンさん。ロリさんの研究は、つい最近2010年9月にニュースとして、多くの科学関係の情報誌で報道された。

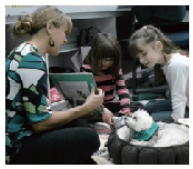
動物介在読み書き学習のプロジェクトでは、犬を言わばクラスメートの仲間として介在させ、学習する環境をより楽しいものにしようというのが意図。基本的には、子供が犬のそばにすわり、指導者と犬のハンドラーのもと、犬に声を出して本を読んであげる。子どもたちは動物とのふれあいの中で、リラックスができる。リラックスするから、友達の目もあまり気にならない。たとえ読み間違いをしても、聞いてくれているのは犬。彼らのフィードバックはいつも ポジティブ。子どもは目信を得て、より本に興味を覚えやすくなるし、より楽しく読書ができる。特に犬がこのお仕事に適しているのは、お話を「よく聞いてくれる」から。ある子供の報告によると

「パパに本を読んでも聞いてくれないけれど、ママと犬ならちゃんと聞いてくれる」

さらに、犬は猫と比べると、話しかけたときに視線を人間に集中させやすいし、表情も柔らかい。訓練さえきちんと入っていれば犬は従順よく、子どもたちのそばに座っていることができる。

研究者のロリ・フリーセンさんは、小学校の2年生（8歳）の教室を、愛犬であるタンゴとスパーキーをつれて、週一回、約4カ月にわたって訪れ、犬介在読解能力学習を行った。タンゴとスパーキーはいずれも、読解能力アシスタントドッグとして、北部アルバータ・ペット・セラピー協会のプログラムにそった、公式な訓練を受けている。おとなしく子どもたちのそばにいつもいれること、子どもの突然の動きに寛容であること、周りの雑音に気をとられたりせず、飼い主よく、子どもにつねに注意を向けていられること、あるいは、本をみていることができる、などが、アシスタント犬に必要な技だ。

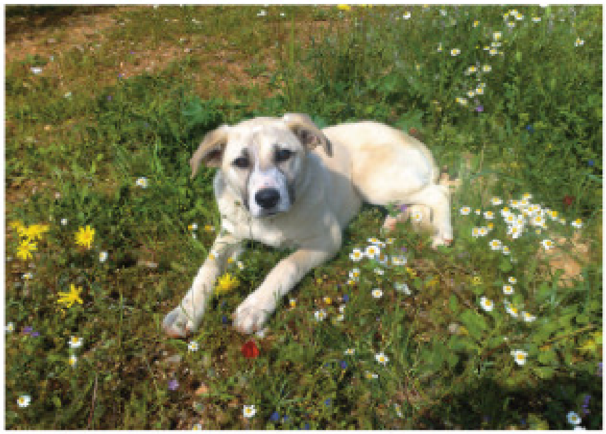
アメリカでは、犬を介在させた本読み能力学習が、数々のセラピードッグ協会などを通して行わ



Ζώα που θεραπεύουν!

Αποδεικνύονται ιδιαίτερα αποτελεσματικά για παιδιά που αντιμετωπίζουν αυτισμό, μαθησιακές δυσκολίες ή και... καρκίνο! Ο λόγος για χαρπωμένα κατοικίδια ζώα που ασκούν θεραπευτική δράση ή απλώς δρουν χαλαρωτικά και τονωτικά για τον ψυχισμό μας

ΤΗΣ **ΕΙΡΗΝΗΣ ΒΕΝΙΟΥ**



Η ημίαιμη Κάρλα, η οποία έλαβε μέρος στη μελέτη που έγινε στο Χατζηκυριάκειο Ίδρυμα, αποτελεί μία ακόμη τρανή απόδειξη ότι η ράτσα του σκύλου δεν παίζει ρόλο στην εκπαίδευση

Λίγες ώρες με ένα σκυλάκι, σύμφωνα με μελέτες, αποτελούν βάλσαμο τόσο για την ψυχική όσο και για τη σωματική μας υγεία. Με τη θετική του ενέργεια, τη χαρούμενη φύση του και την ανιδιοτελή του αγάπη ο «καλύτερος φίλος του ανθρώπου» μπορεί να προσφέρει βοήθεια ακόμα και στην αντιμετώπιση σοβαρών ασθενειών, ενισχύοντας την αυτοπεποίθηση των ασθενών και τονώνοντας τη θέλησή τους για ζωή. Δεν είναι τυχαίο άλλωστε που τα προγράμματα θεραπείας με τη βοήθεια ζώων – γνωστά και ως pet therapy ή animal-assisted therapy (AAT) – εφαρμόζονται εδώ και χρόνια σε σχολεία, γηροκομεία, νοσοκομεία και άλλα ιδρύματα του εξωτερικού, δίνοντας εντυπωσιακά αποτελέσματα.

Πολεμώντας τον αυτισμό

Τον περασμένο Οκτώβριο μια ενδιαφέρουσα καναδική μελέτη που διενεργήθηκε σε αυτιστικά παιδιά και δημοσιεύθηκε στο επιστημονικό έντυπο «Psychoneuroendocrinology» έδειξε ότι η καθημερινή επαφή των νεαρών εθελοντών με ειδικά εκπαιδευμένους σκύλους είχε αποτέλεσμα την εντυπωσιακή βελτίωση της συμπεριφοράς και της υγείας τους.

«*Προκειμένου να μπορέσουμε να μετρήσουμε τη θετική επίδραση του σκύλου στην υγεία των παιδιών αυτών αποφασίσαμε να μετρήσουμε τα επίπεδα της ορμόνης κορτιζόλης (σ.σ.: της αποκαλούμενης και "ορμόνης του στρες") στον οργανισμό των παιδιών*» εξηγεί στο «Βήμα» η δρ Σόνια Λιούπιεν, καθηγήτρια Ψυχιατρικής στο Πανεπιστήμιο του Μόντρεαλ και διευθύντρια στο Κέντρο Μελέτης του Ανθρώπινου Στρες στο Νοσοκομείο Λουί Λαφοντέν.

«*Δύο εβδομάδες πριν από την εισαγωγή των ειδικών σκύλων στα σπίτια των 42 παιδιών που έλαβαν μέρος στη μελέτη ελήφθη δείγμα σιέλου για τη μέτρηση της κορτιζόλης. Η διαδικασία αυτή επαναλήφθη και στη διάρκεια της παραμονής των σκύλων στην κάθε οικογένεια για διάστημα τεσσάρων εβδομάδων και στο τέλος, δύο εβδομάδες αφότου είχαν απομακρυνθεί από το κάθε σπίτι*» μας λέει αναλυτικά η ερευνήτρια.

Όπως τονίζει, στο συγκεκριμένο πείραμα χρησιμοποιήθηκαν σκύλοι ράτσας λαμπραντόρ που είχαν ακολουθήσει εκπαίδευση συνοδού τυφλών στο ίδρυμα MIRA με έδρα στο Κεμπέκ και η οποία κοστολογείται περί τις 10.000 δολάρια (δηλαδή περίπου 7.500 ευρώ).

«*Διαπιστώσαμε λοιπόν ότι η επίδραση των σκύλων στην υγεία των αυτιστικών παιδιών ήταν πολύ σημαντική*» αναφέρει η δρ Λιούπιεν. «*Δεν έχουμε δει ποτέ τόσο εντυπωσιακά αποτελέσματα στα επίπεδα κορτιζόλης*».

Τα παραδείγματα που μοιράστηκε μαζί μας η ειδικός ήταν πραγματικά καθηλωτικά: «*Μια μητέρα παραπονιόταν ότι δεν μπορούσε να βγει βόλτα με το παιδάκι της, καθώς εάν ένα αυτιστικό παιδί δει για παράδειγμα μια πέτρα στον δρόμο μπορεί να κάτσει εκεί να τη χαζεύει για ώρες. Με την εισαγωγή του σκύλου και μετά κατάφερε στη μητέρα να κάνει τις βόλτες που τόσο επιθυμούσε με το παιδί της, γιατί η προσοχή του επικεντρωνόταν πλέον στον σκύλο*».

Μετά το τέλος του πειράματος και ενώ οι σκύλοι είχαν χρησιμοποιηθεί «δανεικά» από τους επιστήμονες, το ίδρυμα MIRA αποφάσισε να δωρίσει στις οικογένειες που είχαν συμμετάσχει στη μελέτη τον τετράποδο «θεραπευτή» που είχαν πρόσφατα φιλοξενήσει.

Τετράποδοι «δάσκαλοι»

Πριν από λίγο καιρό η ερευνήτρια **Λόρι Φρίζεν** από το Παιδαγωγικό Τμήμα Δημοτικής Εκπαίδευσης του Πανεπιστημίου της Αλμπέρτα, επίσης στον Καναδά, πραγματοποίησε μια άλλη μελέτη, με αντικείμενο τη βελτίωση που θα μπορούσε να προκαλέσει η παρουσία ενός ζώου ως προς τις μαθησιακές επιδόσεις των παιδιών.

Το πείραμα διάρκειας 10 εβδομάδων έγινε σε σχολεία της Νότιας Αλμπέρτα και σε αυτό έλαβαν μέρος μαθητές της Β' Δημοτικού. Η κυρία Φρίζεν επισκεπτόταν το σχολείο δύο φορές την εβδομάδα, συνοδευόμενη από τα δύο της σκυλάκια, την Τάνγκο και τον Σπάρκι, τα οποία είχαν περάσει από ειδική εκπαίδευση για σκυλοθεραπεία στον σύλλογο Pet Therapy Society of Northern Alberta και είχαν εμπειρία από προηγούμενες συμμετοχές τους σε δραστηριότητες με παιδιά.

Σύντομα διαπίστωσε μεγάλη βελτίωση στους μικρούς μαθητές: έγιναν πιο επιμελείς, έκαναν λιγότερα λάθη και αύξησαν την αγάπη τους για την ανάγνωση ή άλλα μαθήματα που... μοιράζονταν με τον μικρό τους τετράποδο φίλο.

«*Η επιτυχία του προγράμματος οφείλεται στη ζεστασιά και την ανιδιοτελή αποδοχή των σκύλων, η οποία μέσω της συμμετοχής τους σε μαθησιακές δραστηριότητες φαίνεται να προσφέρει μια μοναδική μορφή κοινωνικής και συναισθηματικής υποστήριξης. Η μεγαλύτερή μου έκπληξη ωστόσο είχε να κάνει με το γεγονός ότι τα παιδιά συμμετείχαν ενθουσιωδώς στο πρόγραμμα αυτό*» μας λέει η κυρία Φρίζεν.

«*Παρά το γεγονός ότι προσωπικά αγαπώ τα ζώα, θεωρούσα ότι ανάμεσα στα παιδιά ενδεχομένως να υπήρχαν κάποια που να μην ήθελαν να συμμετέχουν στις συνεδρίες, είτε γιατί μπορεί να είχαν κάποιους φόβους, είτε γιατί ήταν αλλεργικά, ή ακόμα και γιατί δεν θα τους ενδιέφερε καν κάτι τέτοιο. Παρ' όλα αυτά, όχι μόνο συμμετείχαν όλα τους στις 20 διαφορετικές συνεδρίες, αλλά οργάνωναν τα μαθήματα και τις υποχρεώσεις τους με τέτοιον τρόπο ώστε να μη χάσουν ποτέ τη σειρά τους. Αυτό ήταν πραγματικά εντυπωσιακό*» καταθέτει ενθουσιασμένη η καναδή ερευνήτρια.

Η ίδια υποστηρίζει ότι τα προγράμματα με τη βοήθεια ζώων θα μπορούσαν να αποτελέσουν πολύ-

ΑΠΟ ΤΗΝ ΠΛΕΥΡΑ ΤΟΥ ΣΚΥΛΟΥ

Ο ψυχισμός του σκύλου, κατά τον εκπαιδευτή σκύλων κ. Διαμαντάκο, θα πρέπει να αποτελεί τον πυρήνα του σχεδιασμού των προγραμμάτων αυτών.

«Το ζώο θα πρέπει να χρησιμοποιηθεί για πολύ συγκεκριμένο χρονικό διάστημα, έτσι ώστε να μην έρχεται αντιμέτωπο με απολύτως πληροφορίες, να κουράζεται και να στρεσάρεται. Μέσα από σύντομες συνεδρίες δηλαδή, βοηθάμε τον σκύλο να προσαρμόζεται εύκολα στις νέες συνθήκες» αναλύει ο ειδικός. «Όπως και να έχει, ο σκύλος που συμμετέχει σε ένα τέτοιο πρόγραμμα θα πρέπει να έχει περάσει από εκπαίδευση, ενώ θα πρέπει να υπάρχει η παρουσία και η καθοδήγηση ενός ειδικού».

Η ράτσα, υπογραμμίζει ο ίδιος, δεν αποτελεί ζητούμενο της ειδικής εκπαίδευσης. «Η Κάρλα που χρησιμοποιήθηκε στη μελέτη είναι ημίαιμη και δεν είναι κάποιας ράτσας. Στην εκπαίδευση ο σκύλος πρέπει να μάθει να ανέχεται καταστάσεις και συμπεριφορές. Θα πρέπει να έχει εξοικειωθεί με διάφορα "ατυχήματα" που ενδεχομένως να συμβούν κατά τη διάρκεια των συναντήσεων – όπως π.χ. το πάτημα της ουράς ή του ποδιού, ή ακόμα και με θορύβους που μπορεί να έχουν να κάνουν για παράδειγμα με τον χώρο ενός νοσοκομείου – προκειμένου να μπορεί να αποδώσει τα μέγιστα. Θα πρέπει δηλαδή να έχει απευαισθητοποιηθεί από μια σειρά ερεθισμάτων» επισημαίνει ο κ. Διαμαντάκος.

«Μια τέτοια εκπαίδευση κρατάει αρκετό καιρό – έχει τουλάχιστον έξι μήνες προετοιμασίας – και πρέπει να συνεχίζεται. Για τον σκύλο τίποτα δεν θεωρείται δεδομένο. Όσο πιο νεαρός είναι τόσο πιο γρήγορα μαθαίνει, ακριβώς επειδή δεν διαθέτει άλλες εμπειρίες. Το θέμα της εκπαίδευσης συνήθως παρουσιάζεται με ένα πάρα πολύ ωραίο περιτύλιγμα, αυτό της επιβράβευσης, ενώ θα πρέπει να παρουσιάζεται όπως ακριβώς είναι: σαφώς η επιβράβευση είναι η καλύτερη και αποτελεσματικότερη μορφή εκπαίδευσης όμως, όπως υπάρχει βία και καταναγκασμός στη ζωή μας σε διάφορες μορφές, έτσι θα πρέπει και το ζώο να είναι εξοικειωμένο με αυτές, σε ανθρώπινα πάντα όρια και για συγκεκριμένους σκοπούς. Ποια είναι όμως τα όρια στη συμπεριφορά του ανθρώπου που όταν ξεπεραστούν προκαλούν εκνευρισμό και νευρικότητα στο σκύλο και πώς μπορούν να τεθούν υπό έλεγχο;

«Το πιο συνηθισμένο πρόβλημα είναι το γεγονός ότι ο σκύλος δεν κινείται όσο θα ήθελε μέσα στο σπίτι, δεν τρέχει, δεν παίζει συχνές βόλτες ή τη γίνει βόλτα με λουρί με αποτέλεσμα να μην μπορεί να τρέξει» μας λέει ο εκπαιδευτής.

«Αυτό έχει ως αποτέλεσμα τη συσσώρευση ενέργειας η οποία διοχετεύεται αλλού, π.χ. σε ζημιές κτλ. Εάν δεν καλυφθούν οι βασικές ανάγκες του σκύλου (πείνα, δίψα, απουσία φόβου-ασφάλεια, σωματική άσκηση, κτλ.) τότε θα έχει νευρικότητα. Το μέγεθος δεν παίζει ρόλο: όλες οι ράτσες εκπαιδεύονται ανάλογα με τις ανάγκες και τα χαρακτηριστικά τους» επισημαίνει ο κ. Διαμαντάκος.

Όπως διαπίστωσε στη μελέτη της η ερευνήτρια Λόρι Φρίζεν, η παρουσία ενός ζώου στην τάξη μπορεί να βελτιώσει σημαντικά τις μαθησιακές επιδόσεις των μαθητών

τιμο συμπληρωματικό εργαλείο στον στίβο της εκπαίδευσης.

Η μάθηση γίνεται παιχνίδι

«Το συγκεκριμένο πρόγραμμα θύμιζε στα παιδιά "παιχνίδι" και παράλληλα τους προσέφερε τη δυνατότητα να χαλαρώσουν και να ενισχύσουν τις μαθησιακές τους ικανότητες βάζοντας σε τάξη όλα αυτά που μάθαιναν κατά τη διάρκεια του κανονικού τους μαθήματος» αναφέρει η κυρία Φρίζεν.

Μεγάλη προσοχή όπως υπογραμμίζει η ίδια χρειάζεται ωστόσο ο σχεδιασμός των συγκεκριμένων προγραμμάτων προκειμένου να έχουν το επιθυμητό αποτέλεσμα.

«Τις πρώτες δύο ημέρες βρισκόμουν στην τάξη χωρίς τους "συνοδούς" μου με σκοπό να εξηγήσω στα παιδιά τον τρόπο με τον οποίο θα έπρεπε να συμπεριφέρονται απέναντι στους σκύλους [illegible] πώς να επικοινωνούν με αυτούς, πώς να διαβάζουν τη γλώσσα σώματός τους, ποιες συμπεριφορές ήταν αποδεκτές από τους σκύλους και ποιες όχι. Με τον τρόπο αυτό τα παιδιά ένιωθαν αυτοπεποίθηση όταν βρίσκονταν στον ίδιο χώρο με τα ζώα» τονίζει.

Στην παρούσα φάση, κατά την κυρία Φρίζεν, βρίσκονται σε εξέλιξη αρκετά προγράμματα με ζώα που αποβλέπουν στη μαθησιακή βελτίωση παιδιών. Στην κορυφή της κατάταξης βρίσκονται οι ΗΠΑ με δραστηριοποίηση στον τομέα αυτό σε 43 Πολιτείες, ενώ ακολουθούν ο Καναδάς με τέσσερις επαρχίες, η Αυστραλία, η Βρετανία, η Ινδία και η Κίνα.

«Παρά το γεγονός ότι τα προγράμματα αυτά έχουν γίνει ευρέως γνωστά σε παγκόσμιο επίπεδο, η έρευνα ως προς τα οφέλη που αποκομίζουν τα παιδιά κατά τη διάρκεια των συνεδριών ή τη βοήθεια που μπορούν να προσφέρουν αυτές στο γενικότερο πλαίσιο της τάξης είναι ακόμα αρκετά περιορισμένη» σημειώνει η ερευνήτρια.

Τόνωση της αυτοεκτίμησης

Γιατί όμως τα παιδιά με μαθησιακές δυσκολίες δείχνουν να βοηθούνται ιδιαίτερα από την παρουσία των χαριτωμένων τετράποδων;

«Τα παιδιά αυτά, ακριβώς επειδή συνήθως αισθάνονται μειονεκτικά για τις σχολικές τους επιδόσεις και αποτυχίες, μέσα από την επαφή τους με τα ζώα αποκτούν μεγαλύτερη αυτοεκτίμηση και αυτοπεποίθηση» αποκαλύπτει η κυρία Σίλα Τσάλη, ψυχολόγος με εξειδίκευση στην αξιολόγηση και αποκατάσταση μαθησιακών δυσκολιών.

«Λειτουργούν καλύτερα γιατί τα ζώα εκφράζουν την αγάπη τους ανιδιοτελώς στα παιδιά αυτά, χωρίς να τα κρίνουν ή να τα επικρίνουν όπως πολλές φορές συμβαίνει με τους δασκάλους και τους γονείς τους. Οπότε μέσα από τη μη λεκτική επικοινωνία που έχουν με τα ζώα νιώθουν μεγαλύτερη αποδοχή. Πολύ σημαντικό επίσης είναι το γεγονός ότι τα παιδιά με μαθησιακές δυσκολίες [illegible] καθημερινούς στόχους φροντίζοντας τα κατοικίδια και μαθαίνοντας να [illegible] περισσότερο στις δυνατότητές τους παρά στους περιορισμούς που αντιμετωπίζουν» αναφέρει η κυρία Τσάλη.

Σύμφωνα με την ίδια, τα παιδιά που έχουν ένα κατοικίδιο στο σπίτι βοηθούνται ιδιαίτερα γιατί μέσα από την καθημερινή τους επαφή με αυτό αποκτούν σφαιρική ανάπτυξη. «Επιπλέον, μαθαίνουν να συμπεριφέρονται στους άλλους χωρίς επιθετικότητα, γίνονται υπεύθυνα και συνεπή άτομα, καθώς αναλαμβάνουν τη φροντίδα του κατοικιδίου τους, αυξάνουν την αυτοεκτίμηση, τον αυτοέλεγχο, την αυτοπειθαρχία, τον αυτοσεβασμό τους, ενώ παράλληλα καλλιεργούν τις επικοινωνιακές τους δεξιότητες, την ομαδικότητα και το πνεύμα συνεργασίας τους» συμπληρώνει.

«Από την άλλη πλευρά, στην περίπτωση των αυτιστικών παιδιών η καθημερινή επαφή με ένα ζωάκι τα βοηθά να αισθάνονται ασφάλεια στον κοινωνικό κόσμο, όπως αυτά τον αντιλαμβάνονται. Μπορεί δηλαδή να τα βοηθήσει να αισθάνονται λιγότερο στρες και άγχος και να αρχίσουν να κατανοούν και να συναισθάνονται τις ανάγκες των άλλων ανθρώπων. Η αλληλεπίδραση αυτή τα βοηθά ακόμα να κοινωνικοποιούνται πιο εύκολα» καταλήγει η ειδικός.

Πρώτες απόπειρες στην Ελλάδα

Το 2008, στο πλαίσιο του μεταπτυχιακού του στη Σχολή Ψυχολογίας του Πανεπιστημίου του Σαουθάμπτον, ο κ. **Βαγγέλης Διαμαντάκος**, εκπαιδευτής σκύλων της Πολεμικής Αεροπορίας, με σπουδές στη συμπεριφορά των ζώων και στην αλληλεπίδρασή τους με τον άνθρωπο, εκπόνησε μια ενδιαφέρουσα μελέτη στο Χατζηκυριάκειο Ίδρυμα Παιδικής Προστασίας, στην οποία συμμετείχαν συνολικά 17 κορίτσια ηλικίας 7 ως 11 ετών.

«Το πρόγραμμα πραγματοποιήθηκε με τη βοήθεια της Κάρλας – ενός νεαρού ημίαιμου θηλυκού εκπαιδευμένου σκύλου – και αφορούσε επισκέψεις δύο φορές την εβδομάδα στους χώρους του ιδρύματος για περίοδο περίπου ενάμιση μήνα» μας λέει ο κ. Διαμαντάκος.

«Κάθε φορά μαζί με τα παιδιά είχαμε έναν διαφορετικό στόχο ως προς τις ασκήσεις που μπορεί να κάνει ο σκύλος. Καταφέραμε λοιπόν να κάνουμε τα παιδιά να ασκούνται πνευματικά και σωματικά, να επικοινωνούν στον σκύλο, να συζητούν και να ανακαλύπτουν το ενδιαφέρον τους γι' αυτόν, γεγονός που σύμφωνα με τη μετέπειτα αξιολόγηση τα βοήθησε σε πολλούς τομείς. Είδαμε ότι τα αποτελέσματα ήταν ιδιαίτερα ενθαρρυντικά και τα παιδιά [illegible] αισθητή βελτίωση ως προς την αυτοεκτίμησή τους, τη συμπεριφορά τους, τις σχολικές τους επιδόσεις, τις σχέσεις τους με συνομηλίκους τους και τη φυσική τους κατάσταση» υποστηρίζει.

Σε επόμενη φάση, στο πλαίσιο του διδακτορικού του, ο κ. Διαμαντάκος ετοιμάζει αντίστοιχη έρευνα σε σχολεία, υπό την επίβλεψη του κ. **Γιώργου Κλεφτάρα**, αναπληρωτή καθηγητή του Παιδαγωγικού Τμήματος Ειδικής Αγωγής του Πανεπιστημίου Θεσσαλίας.

[illegible]@tovima.gr

ΠΡΟΣΠΕΡΝΩΝΤΑΣ ΤΗ ΓΡΑΦΕΙΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ

Στην Ελλάδα, όπως μας ενημερώνει η πρόεδρος του Πανελλήνιου Κτηνιατρικού Συλλόγου κυρία **Αθηνά Τραχήλη**, οποιεσδήποτε προσπάθειες για επικοινωνία είχαν γίνει κατά το παρελθόν με τα αρμόδια υπουργεία για την εισαγωγή της συγκεκριμένης θεραπευτικής προσέγγισης δεν βρήκαν ποτέ ανταπόκριση.

«Στόχος μας είναι να ξεκινήσουν τέτοια προγράμματα σε όλα τα μεγάλα νοσοκομεία» αναφέρει η κυρία Τραχήλη. «Ήδη το πρώτο πρόγραμμα επισκεπτικής θεραπευτικής παρέμβασης στο ογκολογικό τμήμα του Νοσοκομείου Παίδων "Αγλαΐα Κυριακού" με πρωταγωνιστή τον Χιούδο, ένα αρσενικό κουνελάκι, έχει δείξει εντυπωσιακά αποτελέσματα ως προς την ψυχική ανάταση των μικρών ασθενών. Το χαριτωμένο ζωάκι εισήχθη στο νοσοκομείο πριν από περίπου τρία χρόνια με αφορμή τη διδακτορική διατριβή της κτηνιάτρου κυρίας **Κατερίνας Λουκάκη**.

«Εν όψει των γενικότερων ανακατατάξεων στην πρωτοβάθμια εκπαίδευση, στείλαμε επιστολή στο υπουργείο Παιδείας, Διά Βίου Μάθησης και Θρησκευμάτων για την ένταξη στο σχολικό πρόγραμμα μιας σειράς μαθημάτων που να ξεκινούν από την προώθηση και ανάπτυξη της ζωοφιλίας και να φτάνουν μέχρι το φυσικό περιβάλλον, την υγιεινή και την ασφάλεια των τροφίμων» λέει η κυρία Τραχήλη υπογραμμίζοντας πως η παιδεία απέναντι στα ζώα αποτελεί τη βάση για την επιτυχή εφαρμογή και κοινωνική αποδοχή τέτοιων μεθόδων θεραπευτικής παρέμβασης.

«Επίσης στην Ελλάδα δεν υπάρχει αρμόδια αρχή που να ελέγχει όλους όσοι δηλώνουν εκπαιδευτές σκύλων. Δεν υπάρχουν σχολές επαγγελματικής κατάρτισης, π.χ. ΙΕΚ ή ΤΕΙ, που να προσφέρουν σε κάποιον τη δυνατότητα να γίνει εκπαιδευτής με πιστοποιημένο κρατικό δίπλωμα» καταλήγει η πρόεδρος.

APPENDIX Q
COMPLETE LIST OF PUBLICATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH THIS RESEARCH STUDY

Books

Friesen, L. (2008). *The beginning teacher's handbook for elementary school.* Calgary, AB: Detselig Publishers.

Refereed Articles

Friesen, L. (2012). Animal-assisted literacy learning as carnival: A Bakhtinian analysis. *The International Journal of Learning, 18*(3), 305-324.

Friesen, L. & Delisle, E. (2012, March/April). Animal-assisted literacy: A supportive environment for constrained and unconstrained learning. *Childhood Education International, 22*(2), 102-107.

Friesen, L. (2010). Potential for the role of school-based animal-assisted literacy mentoring programs. *Language & Literacy*, *12*(1), 21-37.

Friesen, L. (2010). Animals in children's literature: A powerful motivator for literacy learning. *Focus on Elementary: Association for Childhood Education International, 22*(2), 1-7.

Friesen, L. (2009). Exploring animal-assisted programs with children in school and therapeutic contexts. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 37*(4), 261-267.

Friesen, L. (2009). How a therapy dog may inspire student literacy engagement in the elementary language arts classroom. [Special issue.] *LEARNing Landscapes, 3*(1), 105-122.

Non-Refereed Articles

Friesen, L. (2010, Winter). Literacy learning goes to the dogs. *ATA Magazine, 91*(2).

Friesen, L. (2009). Tango as teacher: Literacy learning with love. *The Latham Letter, 30*(4), 14-15.

Friesen, L. (2009, February). Tango time. *Pet Therapy Society of Northern Alberta PeTS News*.

Manuscripts in Progress

Invited Book Chapter:

Friesen, L. (2011). *Establishing a Climate of Care and Trust: Guidelines for Volunteers' Entry and Sustained Involvement in Animal-Assisted Literacy Programs in Elementary Classrooms*. Manuscript in preparation for publication in *Learning to Care: Humane Education in Early Childhood*. Eds. M. R. Jalongo, J. P. Isenberg, & W. M. Siu., Springer Publishers.

APPENDIX R:
INVENTORY OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE INCORPORATED INTO THIS STUDY (Arranged in alphabetical order by section)

Non-fiction:
Animal Friends by Tammi Salzano
Animals at the Edge: Saving the World's Rarest Creatures by Johnathan Baille
ASPCA: Having Fun with Your Dog by Audrey Pavia
Incredible Animals
I Spy a Dinosaur's Eye by Jean Marzollo
May I Pet Your Dog? By Stephanie Calmenson
Mister Got to Go by Lois Simmie (based on a true story)
My Love Unleashed by John Drysdale
Owen and Mzee: The True Story of a Remarkable Friendship by Isabella Hatkoff

Letter-writing:
Dear Mr. Blueberry by Simon James
Dear Mrs. LaRue: Letters from Obedience School by Mark Teague

Jokes and Riddles:
Dino Riddles by Katy Hall and Lisa Eisenberg
99 1/2 Animal Jokes, Riddles and Nonsense by Holly Kowitt

Drawing Books:
Drawing Cats – Illustrated by Katy Bratun
How to Draw Animals by Kerry Trout
How to Draw Horses by Carrie A. Snyder

Poetry:
Dirty Dog Boogie by Loris Lesynksi
Nothing Beats a Pizza by Loris Lesynski

Fiction about dogs:
A Very Unusual Dog by Dorothy Joan Harris
Boomer Goes to School by Constance W. McGeorge
Chewy Louie by Howie Schneider
Dudley: The Little Terrier That Could by Stephen Green-Armytage
Hairy Maclary from Donaldson's Dairy by Lynley Dodd
Hooray for Reading Day by Margery Cuyler
Rough Weather Ahead for Walter the Farting Dog by William Kotzwinkle, Glenn Murray, and Elizabeth Gundy
Stanley's Beauty Contest by Linda Bailey
Stanley's Party by Linda Bailey
Walter the Farting Dog by William Kotzwinkle and Glenn Murray

Walter the Farting Dog: Trouble at the Yard Sale by William Kotzwinkle and Glenn Murray

Fiction about other animals too:
Hairy Maclarey Scattercat by Lynley Dodd
Kat Kong by Dav Pilkey
Please Clean Up Your Room! By Itah Sadu
The Dog Who Had Kittens by Polly M. Robertus
The Polar Bears are Hungry by Carol Karrick
The True Story of the Three Little Pigs by Jon Scieszka
Walter the Farting Dog: Trouble at the Yard Sale by William Kotzwinkle and Glenn Murray

Fiction that's good for kids' hearts and souls/Student interest:
Hotel for Dogs: Friday's Tail (Tale) by Eliza Elliot
Ish by Peter Reynolds
The Blue Day Book for kids: A Lesson in Cheering Yourself Up by Bradley Trevor Greive
The Dot by Peter Reynolds
The Hockey Card by Jack Siemiatycki and Avi Slodovnick

Seasonal Books:

Fall and Thanksgiving:
A Plump and Perky Turkey by Teresa Bateman
Red Leaf, Yellow Leaf by Lois Ehlert
Why Do Leaves Change Color? By Betsy Maestro

Halloween:
Boo! By Robert Munsch
Guess What? By Mem Fox
(Halloween Poetry): *Halloween Hoots and Howls* by Joan Horton
(Word Finds) *Ultimate Hidden Pictures on Halloween* by Tony and Tony Tallarico
Which Witch is Which? By Judi Barrett

Winter and Christmas:
I Spy Christmas: A Book of Picture Riddles - Photographs by Walter Wick and Riddles by Jean Marzollo
Snowdragon by Andrew Breakspeare
Snowmen at Night by Caralyn Buehner