

Home Is Where The Dog Is: Pets As Significant Reading Partners For Reluctant Readers

The old adage "Like father-like son" seems so true as Alex and his son AJ (Alex Jr.) offer encouraging, interested looks to Justin as he orally reads a book to them. This may sound like just another day in most children's lives but Alex and AJ are Labrador Retrievers and Justin is a child who suffers from autism. When Justin attempts to read without his canine support, he is unable to do so because of stemming behaviors which include perseverated utterances and self inflicted abusive slapping.

Motivation

At The Reading Room, which is a private instructional setting for disabled and less fluent readers, Alex and AJ play a significant role in the instructional environment and in Justin's motivation.

Justin is one of many children whose reading performance seems to be enhanced because he is motivated to read when Alex and AJ are a part of the instructional formula. Educators are in agreement that when learners are highly motivated, and engaged in meaningful and purposeful learning experiences, they learn more readily. (Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997)

While the establishment of a motivating environment is a goal of all teachers, it's important to realize that motivation, in addition to being teacher created, can also come from within the student, as well as from other students and experiences. Being motivated involves a complex set of ongoing experiences which occur in the learning environment that create a community of learners excited to participate in literacy events. In such an environment learners take ownership for their own behaviors. They believe they can make appropriate decisions about learning tasks while cooperating with other members of the learning community. Such motivation results in the development of very positive attitudes and enthusiasm for literacy and learning.

Pets as Partners

While representing a man who was suing

another man over the death of his dog, former Missouri senator George Graham Vest acting as the prosecution attorney stated: " Gentlemen of the jury: The best friend a man has in this world may turn against him and become his enemy...The only absolutely unselfish friend a man may have in this selfish world, the one that never deserts him, the one that never proves ungrateful or treacherous is his dog...When all other friends desert, he remains...faithful and true to death."

Many administrators have designed programs to use dogs in hospitals and nursing homes because they realized that dogs are friendly and reliable. Many people have also reported lowered stress and anxiety when they were nurtured by the affectionate attention of a dog. In addition, patients in hospitals and nursing homes are often more receptive to treatment when pets are a part of the health formula. Animal-assisted health programs in nursing homes are believed to increase self-care activity, mobility, and cooperation among participants. Depression is often relieved or eliminated when a pet becomes a variable in the recovery formula. (Anderson, 1984; Masson, 1997)

With such positive effects occurring for the sick and elderly who are partnered with pets for therapy, educators may be wise to address the question, *Is there a place for animals in the learning environment?* As teachers and parents we are quick to acknowledge the excitement that occurs when a gerbil, fish or some other small animal becomes a member of a classroom community. But we may be pondering the role and management of a dog as a part of the mix.

Audience

Alex and AJ are the nonjudgmental audience that many reluctant readers are longing to find. The children at The Reading Room are taught to visualize Alex and AJ as their audience when they are asked to orally read or present an oral report in their regular classrooms. This becomes

quite familiar visualization since Alex and AJ are a real audience at The Reading Room. They report that this form of visualizing makes them feel more comfortable, which in turn enables them to perform better when participating in the regular classroom. Too often children feel a lack of security and acceptance if they are less able readers. This feeling of inadequacy affects their performance. "Fluent readers are purposeful, active, and flexible while many poor readers are purposeless, passive, and inflexible." (Winograd & Smith, 1987, p. 309) Once children at The Reading Room experience this sense of security, their attitudes about themselves as readers begin to change. They become more independent, responsible, and engaged.

Independence

"Learned helplessness" is a phrase that is often used to describe low-performing readers who lack confidence in their reading, have lower expectation for their performance, and give up more easily. (Burkowsky & Willows, 1980) When low-performing readers succeed, they often attribute such success to luck. (Wigfield & Asher, 1984) Caring, well-meaning parents and teachers often reinforce such beliefs and behaviors by supplying answers, and by expecting students not to assume responsibility for their performance. Students at The Reading Room begin to develop a sense of responsibility and independence by being responsible for caring for Alex and AJ. While at The Reading Room a student is responsible for checking to be sure that water is in the bowl, treats are in the treat drawer, and bathroom breaks are given if needed. Once children assume these responsibilities they also are more confident in selecting leveled reading that they can read. As evidenced by Justin and other Reading Room students, they appear to become more engaged and responsible for their literacy performance. The environment becomes theirs and they assume that they are in charge of themselves and what is happening. Their attitudes evidence increased confidence in themselves and their performance.

Engagement and Performance

One's ability to read is enhanced by reading. Less able readers have more difficulty reading independently and therefore, are less likely to be encouraged to do so. (Applebee, Langer, &

Mullis, 1988) The bottom 25% of readers read only one quarter as much as the top 25%. (Paul, 1996) If we wish to have students engage successfully in reading they need to be: 1) appropriately placed in a secure, motivating environment, 2) matched to a text they can read, and 3) provided with explicit instruction that will help them to develop skills and strategies they need. When these three principles are intact a sense of community is established and readers flourish. "The longer we allow children's development to lag behind that of their peers the more difficult it becomes to accelerate their learning." (Allington, 1995, p.8) At The Reading Room, Alex and AJ are a major part of ensuring that these three principles are adhered to. The result has been increased literacy performance for Justin and all of the students who attend.

