









**DOG-ASSISTED READING PROGRAMS**  
**A QUEST FOR ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO READING AND**  
**LEARNING FOR CHILDREN**

by

Kathryn Cooper

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## **ABSTRACT**

Reading challenges face many students daily in our schools in this province. Difficulty with reading impacts every subject area. A balanced literacy program must have variety and teachers need several tools at their disposal to support their students. Dog-assisted reading programs are unique reading interventions that have shown tremendous promise across Canada and Internationally. Dog-assisted reading has potential for some of our students and teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador where there is, as yet, no such program. Along with improved reading, intimate time with a dog promotes empathy and kindness, and it can deepen connections to the environment. In this thesis, I argue for the need for dog-assisted reading in Newfoundland and Labrador. Supported by the literature on literacy, learning, motivation, and emotion, as well as literature about dog therapy and dog assisted reading therapy, the necessity for a program of dogs and reading is hard to ignore. Following a review of several existing programs, a pilot program is proposed. This program connects to curriculum outcomes and expectations beyond the curriculum that can be met through dogs and reading.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

Although curricula have changed and will continue to change over time, one thing that remains a non-negotiable item with current curricula is alphabetic literacy. Most things we ask children to do in school demand an ability to navigate print texts. According to the Atlantic Canada Professional Development Resource (2002), “Reading is a critical process for every subject area in the curriculum and for every grade level. During the early grades, in particular, success in school is synonymous with success in reading” (p. 5). Beyond a functional literacy, for many, reading is a lifelong pleasurable experience whereby our lives are enriched by a good book. One of the goals of education is to develop lifelong learners and if reading experiences have been positive in school hopefully this experience will then motivate and encourage children to perpetually embrace reading in broader contexts in their lives. Despite educators’ best intentions to develop readers, we are missing many children along the way. Not only are many students struggling to develop reading and general literacy skills, reading challenges are shaping their entire school experience as negative – too often leaving too many feeling worthless, unhappy, and under intense pressure. Literacy is a complex issue with many strands that weave and mix and reach within the classroom, school, home, and broader community. The focus in this thesis is on one particular strand, that of learning to read print texts in the school environment.

There are many reasons I have been drawn toward exploring dog-assisted reading approaches. Traditional approaches are not meeting many learners' needs. This thesis focuses, in part, on program rationalization and development since it is aimed at schools and their use. To empower educators with yet another reading intervention requires an examination of programs currently used and how they might look here in our province. According to the International Reading Association (2000), while most children do learn to read and write, too many of them have poor skills. Schools fail us all when they fail to teach any child to read and write (p. 1). We need to do things differently and a dog-assisted approach is one such way of reaching students previously missed. The ecological connections are beautiful and vital. Lately, however, the biggest pull for me toward dog-assisted reading programs is the connection – the unconditional love and understanding, perhaps only a companion animal has the ability to share. With so many current technologies promoting isolation, it is urgent to embrace programs that encourage intimate experiences. As stated earlier, the power in reading, for me personally, came from the intimacy of the experience. We become more invested when we care and when we are shown kindness. The emotional connection to reading and learning is something I believe and experience personally, but it is validated by a magnitude of research. The emotional needs of learners cannot be ignored. These needs must be accommodated in order to be successful with reading instruction (Boldt, 2006; Cullen & Shaldon, 2003; Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler, 2008; Dayton-Sakari, 1997; Hargreaves, 2000; Ludwig, 2003; Zorn & Boler, 2007).

We are drawn to and maintain practices that have these associations. Any successes I have had connecting with students in my experience teaching have been from the intimate moments we have shared. Day to day classroom experiences detail a wide range of emotions and reading, specifically is profoundly impacted by emotion. Boldt (2006) writes, "...reading as a relational act carrying enabling and debilitating experiences of success and failure, hope and fear, appreciation and humiliation, pleasure and shame, gain and loss. It is, I will also argue, a relationship moving back and forth between adult and child in which adults have as much potential as children to experience profound emotion and to learn not only a great deal about children but also about themselves" (p. 274). Early mornings before the bell rings connections deepen as I listen to the replay of a student's recent game. More commonly we bond over our shared love of our pets. Remembering a birthday or baking something special for a recess treat captures interest and makes children feel wanted, invited, and appreciated. There is so much in contemporary schooling that encourages a distancing from these experiences. This should worry us and prompt us to look at ways to reconnect. A dog can remind us of the importance to connect, to comfort, and to be compassionate.

#### Background of Project: Biographical Explorations

I like to read. Most of my memories around reading are positive. When I think back to my mother reading to me nightly I still do not know if it is the book that brought me such peace, or the time together – just the two of us. Reading seemed to come relatively easily to me. I like words, how they look, what they mean, where they lead. I like reading words, writing words – shaping them into something that is a piece of me. I

still keep a journal and have one written for my niece. It is a way of capturing memories, celebrations, conflicts, but most importantly, love. As a child, I felt embraced when family members would listen to me read and praise my efforts. Looking back now, it is interesting to me that my audience was mainly made up of non-avid readers, an audience who was easily impressed when I spouted words most did not recognize. I faced no judgment or correction, just people who wanted to hear more. I am certain that played a huge part in me wanting to continue to read. In school, my experience was similar. For a long time, I thought of my primary elementary years as brutal ones. I attended an inner city school where poverty was the norm, family abuse was rampant, and children were very violent. Although my family had little, we had loads of love and our basic needs met. We were the exception in this school. I was a tiny, quiet little kid who most days was terrified to go to school and face the loud, rough playground war zone. Once I was inside the classroom an hour or so, I acclimatized and stayed the day – usually. I realize now a large part of what kept me there was books. My teachers read books and so did I. Here, I had a captive audience with eager listeners in my classmates and teachers. It has taken me many years to lose the pain in my belly that reared up every September, and even now, if I think about some of those experiences, I can easily go back there and feel afraid, but I know those early experiences largely shape who I am today. Reading provided a safe haven in school and home that still brings comfort to me today.

While reading came easily to me for many years, it is only recently that I have been able to see on a small scale how students in my class feel when they are put in a position to read something unfamiliar, or beyond their vocabulary. The first night of the

first course of my Master of Education program had me feeling insecure and out of place. Browsing the syllabus filled me with dread, as much of the terminology was unfamiliar. My comprehension of the goals, expectations, and content of the course was negligible and I doubted I had what it took to figure it out. If my blood pressure had been checked at that moment, it was certainly elevated. I was filled with panic and dread wondering if I would do what was expected of me. The only thing that calmed me was the fact that I am an adult and if this was beyond my grasp, I could opt out. In the early months of my program, many times I felt that the graduate program was a place I did not belong. I felt unprepared, unqualified, and uninvited. Most of my classmates had completed another degree within this university whereas it was new to me – from the building to the professors to the expectations. I try to keep this experience fresh in my mind when I am with my students. Had I been asked to read aloud from the syllabus on that first night, I might never have returned to school. Yet, children usually are powerless and must return and sit frightened in case today might be the day where reading aloud is unavoidable.

Growing up with a mother who read to me every night shaped my relationship with books and reading. I did not see reading as a door way to opportunities for education or professions. I simply saw it as a time to cuddle, to be with someone who loved me. In many ways, I think I still look for that with reading. It is an intimate experience. As a teacher I want my students to also have that feeling of togetherness, of nurturing, of quiet time to relax. I realize many students have not had that same experience of a loved one sharing a book, but I think as teachers we need to try to make the experience of reading as

personal and as loving as we can. My coming to literacy from a place of nurturing and love, I cannot help but be swayed toward reading approaches that encourage the same.

#### Animals and Learning: Further Explorations



Entering the Master of Education program provided a choice to me – the thesis route, or course route. After some thought, the thesis route was most appealing. A chance to read and research a topic of my choice and interest was very attractive. As previously stated, I like to read. Whether reading aloud to my students, discussing a book with a friend, or silently reading in bed, reading brings me back to a time of comfort and connection. Recently my mother dragged all my childhood favourite books from the attic and presented them to me. Looking through them I was transported back to a time of safety, loving, nurturing. As I looked at the old familiar characters, I could hear my mother's voice reading to me and that memory fills me with emotion and gratitude. I am so grateful to have had that nightly experience. It is one I try to share. Pictured above is my niece in the same living room where I grew up around books and dogs. For my family, it is a natural and easy marriage of family, books, and animals. I know I would not enjoy reading today if not for this intimacy. It is less about the books, the words than

it is about the connection. They are inseparable. I feel an obligation to my students to attempt to re-create that for them.

Animals have always been a part of my life, due in large part to my father. His name is Francis and many in my family have dubbed him St. Francis. There are countless photographs of my father rescuing a bird, rabbit, or baby bear. Nightly rituals before reading with my mother would involve drives at dusk looking for any animal and keeping count of how many deer, rabbits, porcupines, or other wildlife we might see. Without exception, it would be my father to spot them first and we would then sit and watch - sometimes a mother nuzzling her baby or a herd of deer grazing in a field. My father's passion for animals is beautiful and has shaped how I see the world. The compassion and connection I see in my father with the environment and animals is a critical life lesson about ecology and interdependence and one I want to share with my students.

Along with wildlife we were also blessed with animals in our home as family pets. Despite the variety of pets over the years, our family never seemed complete without a dog. The loving look from a dog's eyes, or a soft nuzzle into a dog's chest could ease a broken heart. A nightmare was less frightening with a canine companion in the bed. As an adult, my life is much more complete and stable because of my dogs. Alone at night filled me with anxiety. Interrupted sleep from unexplained noises became a thing of the past with the addition of my dogs. Jersey and Seven do not judge or discriminate and they help me feel less lonely and much more secure. Coming home to dogs that wag their tails despite me being sweaty from the gym or irritated by work demands brings incredible joy to my life. Jersey and Seven simply delight in me being home. This complete acceptance

and unconditional love is a lesson for humans. My dogs teach me lessons in patience. They also have become liaisons with our neighbours. Before Jersey, I did not know the name of one neighbour on the street. Jersey caught everyone's attention and as such I met some wonderful people and have become much more connected to my community. I like to think he also inspired others of the beauty a dog brings to a family. Since he arrived, three other families have added a dog to their homes.

Throughout my career as a teacher, I have witnessed many times how dogs and our environment impact young minds. In September 2010 my class was working through a writing assignment. The prompt was to write about a person they admire. I shared some student exemplars from previous years and we brainstormed people who might be worthy of our admiration. I was not surprised to hear the students brainstorm parents, siblings, athletes, inspirational figures such as Terry Fox, and many other humans. I was reminded of the power of a pet when two students asked if they could write about their dog. Who better to admire than the one who loves unconditionally and without judgment?

More recently, this year, in health we were learning about mental health. We were learning the importance of developing trusting relationships with people with whom we could share problems and feelings. The assignment was to write a letter to someone who would listen to their problems. Three students wrote to their dog.

Several times that I have been successful connecting with students, it has involved their dogs. I have met numerous dogs in my classroom. On school wide walks, it is not uncommon to see four-legged friends accompany our students. New puppies frequently visit classrooms. As well, the principal has students' dog pictures posted on her bulletin

board. Pictures of my dogs are visible in the classroom and often break the ice for new students. I encourage students to also have pictures of their pets at their desks. Embracing family pets and celebrating their importance does not go unnoticed by the children. Acknowledging their pets makes children feel valued and appreciated. The mood in the school instantly changes when a dog approaches. There is lightness and a calmer atmosphere.

Connecting with the environment is equally important. There is a noticeable difference in behaviour and mood when the weather has been miserable for days and children cannot get outside. Breathing fresh air and being beyond walls does amazing things to improve concentration. Several years ago I had a student who had extreme difficulty focussing. I observed that any chance he had to create something, he chose to create a tree. Eventually I realized that he needed the outside inside as much as possible. Simply sitting near the window with the gorgeous view of Conception Bay and the woods around our school dramatically helped him to focus for longer periods. We are positively impacted when we are connected and in direct contact with our natural environment (Davis et al., 2008; Norman, 2006).

Personally and professionally, I have seen many incidents where animals and nature have enriched my learning, my teaching, and my life in general. Bringing these elements into the classroom whenever I can has enhanced the school experience for my students and me.

## Statement of the Problem

Although the validity of Criterion Referenced tests can be argued incessantly, they remain one piece of data, which schools, educators, administrators, and other personnel can use as a gauge to assess reading development. Currently the Eastern School District, like all other districts -in Newfoundland and Labrador, relies heavily on them for allocating resources and communicating information to the school community. The charts below are according to the Eastern School District (2010) 2009-2010 Upper Gullies Elementary annual school report which track the four-year trend.

## Primary Language Arts Assessment

## Grade 1: Percentage of Students Performing At or Above Provincial Benchmark

07-08		08-09		09-10	
School	Province	School	Province	School	Province
71.9%	63.5%	58.5%	65.0%	64.4%	62.1%

## Grade 2: Percentage of Students Performing At or Above Provincial Benchmark

07-08		08-09		09-10	
School	Province	School	Province	School	Province
76.9%	68.9%	69.3%	72.4%	49.2%	71.3%

## Criterion Reference Tests

## Grade 3 Language Arts

	06-07		07-08		08-09		09-10	
	School	Province	School	Province	School	Province	School	Province
<b>Multiple Choice:</b>								
Reading	90.9%	89.7%	89.9%	88.5%	88.8%	88.3%	94.0%	92.1%
Listening	93.3%	93.3%	90.0%	85.0%	91.7%	95.4%	82.0%	80.9%
<b>Constructed Response: Percentage of students achieving Level 3 or above</b>								
Demand Writing	86.8%	74.5%	68.8%	72.6%	71.7%	74.9%	81.8%	73.9%
Poetic	76.7%	65.8%	54.1%	56.1%	73.2%	68.8%	81.5%	71.5%
Informational	71.7%	74.4%	68.8%	70.8%	55.4%	55.1%	68.5%	63.6%
Listening	80.3%	64.1%	82.3%	70.2%	69.5%	70.5%	63.6%	59.9%

## Grade 6 Language Arts

	06-07		07-08		08-09		09-10	
	School	Province	School	Province	School	Province	School	Province
<b>Multiple Choice:</b>								
Reading	78.6%	78.0%	83.0%	84.8%	87.8%	87.1%	74.3%	81.0%
Listening	86.7%	93.3%	92.0%	92.0%	88.4%	87.7%	87.1%	86.7%
<b>Constructed Response: Percentage of students performing at Level 3 or above</b>								
Demand Writing	73.2%	76.1%	91.5%	85.1%	78.6%	78.7%	73.3%	81.4%
Poetic	60.9%	73.3%	91.8%	81.2%	62.5%	69.6%	58.3%	69.9%
Informational	47.5%	58.8%	86.7%	78.9%	58.9%	68.0%	63.3%	68.4%
Listening	58.6%	58.4%	63.5%	62.6%	42.6%	47.4%	72.1%	66.7%

(Eastern School District, 2010, pp. 12-14).

According to the Eastern School District (2010) through its annual school report for Upper Gullies Elementary, reading results attained through provincial assessments are not encouraging. One of the most disturbing aspects of these results is the dramatic decline the students in Grade Three in 2007 show by the time they end up in Grade Six in 2010. In 2006-2007 when these students were in Grade Three, 76.7% were at or above the provincial benchmark in poetic reading and 71.7% were at or above the provincial benchmark for informational reading. These statistics alone are not encouraging, but then when these students were in Grade Six in 2009-2010 their reading scores dropped even more. In poetic reading only 58.3% of students were at or above the provincial benchmark in poetic reading a drop of 18.4%. In informational reading, the drop is less significant at only 3.7% (pp. 12-14).

Even without the scores from these standardized tests, our own teachers' classroom assessments and observations would reveal very similar results. Not only does

there seem to be a performance issue, the attitude and desire to read tremendously declines throughout the elementary years.

The provincial results are not very promising either. Over the four-year trend, the last two years, the most recent scores available, indicate the lowest results provincially. The province showed growth from 2007 to 2008 with poetic reading improving from 73.3% to 81.2%, but then dropping 11.6% to 69.6% in 2009 and in 2010 showing essentially no change at 69.9% of students in the province reading at or above the provincial benchmark. Informational reading is comparable. In 2007, 58.8% of students were at or above the provincial benchmark in informational reading and then an increase in 2008 of 20.1% to 78.9%. Then in 2009, there is a 10.9% drop to 68.0% that remained relatively unchanged at 68.4% in 2010 (pp. 12-14). While a full explanation of such results is complex and involves an examination of diverse factors, it would seem that existing reading interventions and supports are inadequate in improving skill, attitude, and desire amongst learners. Many teachers feel they have tried everything currently at their disposal.

#### Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to examine an alternative school-based approach to reading intervention not currently used in Newfoundland and Labrador. Through its examination of existing-programs, this thesis will show that dog-assisted reading programs nationally and internationally have shown tremendous promise in not only improving reading skills, but also increasing positive ecological connections, as well as enhancing potential for teaching kindness and empathy. These results suggest that reading

to dogs can be of tremendous benefit to some students who may be reluctant or struggling to read, especially those children not currently being reached through existing conventions and tools. After careful inspection of existing programs, this thesis will examine the feasibility of and propose a program for Newfoundland and Labrador with consideration given to current learning outcomes mandated by the Department of Education. Suggestions and considerations will be included for implementation of such a program.

#### Research Questions

There are several questions that have guided this research and are addressed throughout the thesis:

- How can animal assistance enhance the conditions of learning?
- What programs exist which might form the basis of a reading program for school students?
- What considerations are involved in developing a school dog-assisted reading program?
- What might such a program include and involve?

#### Definition of Key Terms

*Dog Assisted Reading Programs: A Quest for Alternative Approaches to Reading and Learning for Children* (2012) makes frequent reference to several terms, many of which are utilized in this thesis. These terms along with others, are defined below:

**Animal Assisted Activities (AAA)**

While the terms animal assisted activities and animal assisted therapy are often used interchangeably, they are distinctly different. Animal assisted activities enhance quality of life through benefits associated with motivational, educational, recreational, and/or therapeutic opportunities. Specially trained professionals, paraprofessionals, or volunteers deliver programs in a variety of environments. Both the human and animal must be screened and trained, but are not guided by a credentialed therapist. There is no specific treatment goal and handlers are not required to take detailed notes. Animal Assisted Activities usually involve tasks like visiting with patients, playful activities, friendly petting; in other words, social visits. It is less formal in comparison to animal assisted therapy (Chandler, 2001; Gorczyca et al., 2006; Wilkes, 2009).

**Animal Assisted Learning**

Animal assisted learning is learning that is enhanced by the presence of an animal through, but not limited to, animal assisted activities and/or animal assisted therapy. Animal assisted learning is growing rapidly and its interest global. It requires education and training. It is more than a cute animal and willing adult. To engage children and adults in an animal learning experience requires an understanding of animals and people. A combination of training with animals and human service is essential (Ross, 2011).

**Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT)**

Animal assisted therapy is a goal-directed intervention and more formal than animal assisted activities. Like animal assisted activities, animals and their handlers must be screened, trained, and meet specific criteria. However, animal assisted therapy must

include a health/human service professional with specialized expertise. The professional sets specific goals and works closely with all parties. The interaction between patient and animal is guided by the professional who will also measure progress and evaluate the process. Animal assisted therapy can be thought of as a triangle relationship with three important and necessary corners – the client, animal, and therapist or professional. Although all animal/human interactions may be therapeutic, it is only considered animal assisted therapy when there is a certified professional involved (Chandler, 2001; Gorczyca et al., 2006; King, 2007; Ross, 2011; Wilkes, 2009).

### **Biophilia**

Biophilia is a theory that suggests that humans are genetically predisposed to both attraction and attention to other living organisms. Biophilia is a word that describes a basic human need to connect with other living organisms. The argument stems from an evolutionary debate that humans increased their chance of survival by paying close attention to and knowing well their environment. Throughout evolution humans and animals have been mutually dependent. Humans had to pay attention to animal and plant life in order to survive. The biophilia theory or hypothesis helps explain why animals might encourage a quiet, alert state in humans. The foundation of biophilia is a natural interest in animals and the calming effect of animal presence as well as a need to maintain a connection to nature. One powerful piece of evidence that supports the biophilia hypothesis is the quicker healing time that patients experience simply with a window in their recovery room (Davis et al., 2008; Fine, 2006; Kruger & Serpell, 2006; Melson, 2001; Wilkes, 2009).

**Guided Reading**

Guided reading helps children learn how to use strategies so that they will be able to read independently. In guided reading a teacher supports reading development by working with a small group of students. Guided reading requires ongoing observation and assessment by the teacher of his or her students. This data helps the teacher select appropriate texts, groupings, and reading strategies to highlight student needs and to enhance student learning (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

**Oxytocin**

Oxytocin is a hormone associated with human attachment found in mammals. It is known for its calming effects. Several studies have examined human changes in oxytocin levels when humans interact with dogs. While petting dogs, oxytocin increases. This leads to enhanced feelings of well-being, relaxation, and a more positive mood (Baun, Johnson, & McCabe, 2006; Daley-Olmert, 2009; Fredrickson-MacNamara & Butler, 2010; Hart, 2010).

**Service Animals**

Service animal is an umbrella term to describe any guide dog, signal dog, or other animal trained specifically to assist an individual with a disability. Even though a service animal may provide some psychological benefits to its handler, service animals are tools rather than treatments and their purpose is fundamentally different from animals used in animal assisted therapy or animal assisted activities. Service animals are individually and specifically trained to perform functions for humans who are unable to do these functions on their own (Hart, 2006; Kruger & Serpell, 2006).

### Significance of the Research

While there is a plethora of research available for literacy and therapy dogs generally, there is limited formal research yet measuring the impact of therapy dogs on reading performance. This thesis provides the basis for a program which can eventually be researched to provide such data. Despite the excitement of having dogs in schools, continued research will be critical in the future and can only be done when the program is up and running. While the existing research is limited, it is promising. To complete her Doctor of Education, Corinne Smith (2009) extensively studied the *Sit Stay Read!* Program which has provided invaluable research and is further explored in Chapter Three of this thesis. Julie Paradise (2007) also completed a doctoral dissertation studying the use of therapy dogs as motivators for reluctant readers. Both Smith (2009) and Paradise (2007) provide compelling research indicating children who read to dogs have improved confidence, attitude, interest, and excitement about reading. And, their reading skills also improved. Paradise (2007) writes, "According to the data from this study, it was clear that registered therapy dogs do motivate reluctant readers to improve their reading skills, their attitude toward reading, their attitude toward school, and their self-confidence" (p. 144). The benefits of reading to dogs are numerous and will be explained more fully in Chapter Three.

In addition to the specific research available on dog-assisted reading that indicates positive evidence for dogs and reading, we owe it to our children to do things differently. This point should be a persuasive argument for why dog-assisted reading can work. We need to attempt new programs to reach the children we are missing. According to the

International Reading Association (2000), "Most children learn to read and write in classrooms. Honoring children's rights to effective instruction requires a willingness to question whether today's classrooms are set up to meet their needs as readers and writers" (p. 2). The goal of this research is to propose an alternative means of teaching reading. In my experience teaching for the last ten years, there have been few innovative programs stretching beyond the traditional ones to meet learners' needs. There is a tremendous amount of research indicating a lack of diversity in literacy instruction and a huge need for such diversity. Literacy plans must be diverse. Yet, teaching and learning has essentially remained more or less the same over the years. A balanced literacy approach must have a variety of teaching methods. There is no single way of teaching literacy. Children learn differently and as a result, teachers must have an arsenal of methods to teach and support reading development (Atlantic Canada Professional Development Resource, 2002; Bigum & Lankshear, 1998; International Reading Association, 2000; Lankshear, n.d.; Luke & Freebody, 1999). Implementing a dog assisted reading program in Newfoundland and Labrador would provide teachers with an alternative method of teaching and reading. This thesis provides the basis to explain the need for such a program in Newfoundland and Labrador. Its implementation would allow for further research to be obtained assessing the validity of such a program over an extended period.

#### Limitations of the Research

There are research limitations as a direct result of the particularity of this program. One obvious limit considers that this focus is on dogs specifically, and exclusively rather than simply suggesting dogs as a primary focus with a wider acceptance encompassing several

animal groupings. Some children may respond better to cats, horses, or other, perhaps even exotic animals. This is not something explored in this program. Further, there are limited, arguably even a shortage, of therapy dogs and handlers available once all requirements are assessed, then met and finally matched to a school, then a time of day. Therefore, the program would be quite restricted especially early in its inception. There will not be copious amounts of data initially because the program will start small. Testing cannot begin until the program is implemented which also limits the research. While reading is the focus, potential benefits and strides in other traditional academic areas, such as mathematics, will remain unexplored and thus the potential untapped.

#### Summary

One of our main goals as educators should be to cultivate strong, empathetic, confident, and happy readers. The benefits of dog-assisted reading go far beyond reading improvements. This thesis will investigate how the use of dog-assisted reading programs, in addition to improving reading skills, can connect us more strongly and passionately to each other and, our environment, and enhance our capacity for empathy. Young children who are vulnerable and impressionable are looking to us for guidance and commitment to their learning. We can help shape their future with the use of innovative interventions such as dog-assisted reading programs. The ability to decode and interpret printed text is undeniably important in school and beyond. Current reading interventions are missing many children. Ability, confidence, and interest in reading for many students, especially at the elementary level, are lacking. The purpose of this thesis is to explore an alternative means of reading intervention not currently used in Newfoundland and Labrador.

## Overview of Chapters

### Chapter Two: Review of the Literature – Literacy, Emotion and Learning

Chapter Two provides a review of selected literature related to literacy, emotion, and learning. The literacy focus will look at reading from a print-based, alphabetic literacy perspective. However, while the main focus is on the technical mechanics of reading, attention must also be paid to literacy as a more holistic experience. Chapter Two will also review the literature connected to emotion and learning with specific care and attention to the ways in which we learn that would be enriched with the assistance of a therapy dog.

### Chapter Three: Review of the Literature – Therapy Dogs, Reading Therapy Dogs

Chapter Three provides a review of literature related to therapy dogs that focuses on dogs and elder care, dogs helping humans cope with mobility, illness, and death, dogs and children, dogs and trauma, dogs in prison situations, and dogs and psychotherapy.

Chapter Three provides a review of the related literature available concerning reading therapy dogs.

### Chapter Four: Review of Existing Programs

There is an abundance of reading therapy dog programs currently used in libraries and schools in Canada and elsewhere. Chapter Four will review several of these programs in detail, examining the benefits and challenges of each. This review is essential to guide the direction of a pilot program for Newfoundland and Labrador.

### Chapter Five: A School Based Dog-Assisted Reading Program

Chapter Five starts by building the foundation for the program proposal. This chapter will examine the features of what might be the best program to meet the needs of students in Newfoundland and Labrador. It will also examine necessary conditions to be met in order for the program to be a success. The chapter will also examine at what specific grade level to introduce reading dogs and the current outcomes for the grade level that could be matched appropriately within the dog-assisted reading program. The chapter culminates with a pilot program proposal as a starting point for the province to begin to consider the implementation of a dog-assisted reading program.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Review of the Literature – Literacy, Emotion and Learning**

#### Introduction

Learning is a life-long process that is shaped by a variety of experiences. We learn best when we feel safe, supported, challenged, and engaged. Learning to read is an intimate process through which we can feel elevated or diminished. As with most learning, love and understanding are essential ingredients to elevate the reading experience. Literacy is an invitation – to explore, to touch, to taste, to experience. It is an opportunity to embrace, question, or reject something new or familiar. Based on my professional observations, I believe that many current reading interventions in school settings do the opposite of their intent. Instead of boosting a child's confidence, and motivating them to read, they can often make children hate reading and feel inadequate. Instead of turning them toward reading, they turn them away from reading. I think there are better and more unique and effective ways. The use of dog-assisted reading is one way to introduce some of the essential elements that support learning to read.

The next two chapters review the related literature in four different areas. In order to fully understand the plethora of benefits with dog-assisted reading programs, it is critical to examine the literature around these four areas. The first part of Chapter Two will focus on literacy first by examining reading from a print-based, alphabetic literacy perspective where reading is viewed as largely skills-based and mechanical. Decoding and word recognition are central aspects. In addition, Part One will delve more deeply

into a more holistic experience of reading - the reading between, before, and after the words, aspects that exceed decoding of text.

Part Two of Chapter Two reviews the related literature on emotion, learning, and motivation with specific care and attention to the ways in which we learn that would be enriched with the assistance of a therapy dog. Chapter Three will review the related literature on therapy dogs and reading therapy dogs.

It is my belief that learning to read is an intimate experience. The literature reviewed has been chosen with particular care and respect toward research that resonates with and supports this belief. For example, the intimate connection between a mother and child described by Gail Boldt in her research and writing makes its effect even more powerful as she observes, records, and analyses the emotional experience her son has learning to read. Love and understanding are key ingredients in the process of learning to read; therefore the literature reviewed supports this claim. The necessity for kindness and empathy in our schools is imperative and lacking. In my opinion, to learn well and survive school demands such qualities. We must be ever-mindful of the diverse range of needs, abilities, experiences, and attitudes of our students. Much of the literature reviewed will support the need for a diverse literacy plan that is fluid, ever-evolving, supportive, and empathy-based.

With continual concerns and crises declared by schools, districts, care givers, educators, and students themselves around reading performance, it is time to look at expanding our view of how we can better learn to read and to learn to teach reading. Beyond standardized testing scores, it has been my experience in the classroom that many

students lack confidence and skill in reading the words, between the words, and beyond the words. Traditional methods are only useful some of the time for some of our students. We cannot keep doing the same thing and expect different results.

#### Part One: Literacy

It is a crucial ingredient of the success of literacy planning that systematic and non-stigmatised literacy support across the school years be encouraged (Lo Bianco & Freebody, 1997 p. 90).

I have always believed that Dr. Seuss was in many ways ahead of his time. Several of his messages and warnings still go ignored while the world around us changes and deteriorates. Educators and caregivers feared his books because they might make reading fun. Fifty years later, many things are still the same. Most of Dr. Seuss' books are a contradiction of basic sight words and fun rhymes with powerful important messages. He had a gift for blending the mechanics of reading with powerful world messages like *The Lorax's* environmental warnings. Books like *Green Eggs and Ham* and *The Cat in the Hat* set out to help children recognize basic sight words with frequency, rhyme, and word families. Dr. Seuss' complexities parallel the world of literacy.

Literacy was once understood in terms of reading and writing only, and with an emphasis on encoding and decoding skills. Of course, encoding and decoding remain essential components of literacy. However, literacy is immense. From decoding to critically questioning an author's choices, literacy is as broad as the number of books at the Library of Congress! With several ingredients making up the recipe of literacy, reading, as one of the key ingredients, is the main focus of this thesis. However, to gain a better understanding of reading, it is necessary to look at literacy more broadly. Even

while narrowing the focus to reading, it cannot be seen in isolation as no one aspect of literacy can float alone. They are complex, inter-connected, and ever-evolving. Therefore definitions of literacy vary greatly. Literacy definitions range broadly from skills-based, functional literacy to cultural literacy to very wide, all-encompassing definitions integrating social and political empowerment, such as critical literacy. Yet, despite these wide ranges of definitions, part of the defining characteristic of literacy must be that there are many capabilities required to contribute in a literate society (Lankshear, n.d.; Lo Bianco & Freebody, 1997). Although there is no single definition of literacy, it can seem that in many ways our approach to developing it in schools is still quite singular. There is no one best way to develop literacy.

Teachers must be ever mindful and able to make choices that best meet the needs of each student. Schools, districts, and governmental agencies must support a diversity of resources and practices available to and celebrated by educators. According to Luke and Freebody (1999), "Choices regarding instructional practice should be made by teachers, and we would argue that this kind of classroom decision making needs to be defended zealously as part of teachers' work..." (p. 3). Literacy education is a part of a larger project that must balance individual needs with group needs. There must be fluidity to weave between the personal and group goals and to navigate through diverse social groupings. Literacy educators must themselves be flexible and knowledgeable readers and writers. Despite a reduction in preparation time, larger class sizes, streamlined curriculum, and standardized tests, teachers need to be diverse in their literacy plans. To be effective, professional development opportunities are vital. Teachers need support in

becoming confident and competent in implementing new ideas. A balanced literacy approach is crucial where there is small and whole group instruction that includes speaking, listening, reading, viewing, writing, and representing (Atlantic Canada Professional Development Resource, 2002; Bigum & Lankshear, 1998; Comber, 1998b; Lankshear, n.d.; Luke, 1998).

Literacy is a social construct and is always contextual. It is a social practice. To understand literacy it must be related to social practices. It is always entangled with ways of being in the world. It cannot be reduced to technical skill only, but is much more than that. Our individual and collective identities and personal being deeply impact the way we relate to reading and writing. Literacy is diverse and evolves depending on context and culture. It cannot be considered in a single definition. Since literacy is a social practice so too must be the teaching of it. Educators need to weave in and out, navigating each student's needs as literacy skills shape and re-shape. Literacy cannot be defined only in narrow terms centring exclusively on code-cracking. Its development relies on more than the technical. Effective literacy can require attention to spelling, punctuation, and grammar, but engaging meaningfully with the other resources of literacy is also critical. For example, how might an emphasis on spelling, punctuation and grammar distort rather than enhance an understanding of literacy practices using new social media such as chat, texting, and Twitter? It is through social relationships that we learn literacies. Literacy has evolved in particular societies and the meanings we garner from them connect us to others and the meanings they have developed (Lankshear, n.d.; Lemke, 2005; Lo Bianco & Freebody, 1997; Luke 1998; Luke & Freebody, 1999; Street, 2003).

At one of the earliest stages, learning to read is about letter and word recognition and using pictures to help establish meaning. Ludwig (2003) described this 'skills approaches' category of literacy where perceptual and technical procedures of decoding are emphasized (p. 1). But it is only one layer of literacy and literacy education. Many scholars have developed models of literacy that are very helpful in painting a fuller picture of the complexity of literacy and literacy education. In the following section, two of these models - the *Four Resources Model* and the *Three Dimensional View of Literacy* - are reviewed.

#### The Four Resources Model

In Luke & Freebody's (1999) *Four Resources Model* learners engaged in reading and writing activities draw on practices that allow them to become *code-breakers*, *meaning makers*, *text users*, and *text analysts*. To become a *code-breaker*, fundamental features of written texts are recognised and used. These include alphabet, sounds in words, spelling, conventions, and patterns of sentence structure and text. *Meaning makers* participate in the construction of meanings of text. This entails not only understanding, but also creating meaningful written, visual and spoken texts within a wide range of contexts. *Text users* use texts functionally, peeling back the layers of the social relations surrounding a text. This use requires ability to not only recognize but act on the diverse cultural and social impacts of texts that influence them in and out of school. *Text analysts* critically analyse and transform texts. They recognize that texts are not neutral, but instead represent certain views and ideas and silence others. While texts can influence people's

ideas, *text analysts* are not willing to passively accept what is being said as indisputable (Luke & Freebody, 1999).

### The Three Dimensional View of Literacy

The *Three Dimensional View of Literacy* grew from a concern Green (2002) referred to as “subject-specific literacy”. There is a strong relationship between literacy and learning and all teachers in every subject area need to keep this relationship at the center of their concerns. The *Three Dimensional View of Literacy* is holistic and integrated and is comprised of three interlocking dimensions: the operational, cultural, and critical. Although it does not matter from which dimension you start, all three dimensions must be taken into account equally. Neither has priority over another and these interlocking dimensions work together within language, meaning, and context. The *operational dimension* focuses on the language aspect of literacy where reading and writing takes place in a range of contexts. The *cultural dimension* can also be referred to as meaning making. It is being able to understand texts in relation to contexts. The *critical dimension* of literacy recognises that knowledge and literacy practices are socially constructed. Critical questions are asked and along with making meaning, individuals also transform and build alternate perspectives (Green, 2002; Lankshear, n.d.).

The commonalities of these two models suggest the key goals of a contemporary literacy education. A balanced literacy approach is critical. Part of such balance includes, especially in the early school years (entry to grade 3), an alphabetic focus. Children are taught to recognize and name letters. In addition, children learn an association of letters and sounds when they use phonetics. To become a *code breaker* children sound out

words, try, and make mistakes. To break the code, readers need to know the look and sound of the alphabet, and be able to use this to encode or decode words. Then code breaking involves using words to read and write sentences (Atlantic Canada Professional Development Resource, 2002; Lankshear, n.d).

With the best of intentions, we often interrupt the process of *code breaking* through correction. But constant over-correction halts reading progress. According to Delpit (1995), there are many negative consequences to over-correcting a child while she or he is reading. This over-correction stifles rather than improves skills. Fluency is drastically impacted with constant correction. Ultimately, comprehension is affected by these interruptions too. Eventually a reader may develop resentment toward reading and his or her teacher often because of the shame that becomes associated with it. In addition, the idea that reading should be a meaning making process is lost when the focus is exclusively on code and pronunciation (Delpit, pp. 50, 59-61). One of the requirements of literacy is the coding of information, a necessary decoding and encoding of information in reading and writing. If they are going to help children meet this requirement, teachers must create a space where frequent, uninterrupted opportunities to read are presented to their students.

Children need frequent opportunities to read aloud. There are many benefits to reading aloud. Fluency and phrasing will improve with frequent oral reading opportunities with different kinds of texts. When children read aloud, they become more engaged and their comprehension also improves (Kuhn et al., 2006; Munro, 2003). In my experience, when reading aloud is done in a safe, supportive environment with

manageable texts, the confidence of students improves as they take pride in identifying words. When children read aloud, it also can help the teacher build phonemic awareness and to identify sounds, letters, words, or even punctuation that is not yet understood by a student. It has also been my experience that when a child is reading aloud with me it opens a space for conversation and dialogue about the text. Often a student will stop reading and say they did not think it was fair the way one character treated another. Or, we might laugh together at a funny situation. If we come to a word that neither of us knows it shows that our journey of learning to read is ongoing. Then we can talk through strategies of figuring it out.

To develop confident, competent readers, it is critical to fill our classrooms with a variety of texts. Students should be encouraged to discuss the features, such as headings, which will help them to predict and confirm as they read. Automatic word recognition increases when there is extensive exposure to print. As word recognition becomes automatic, less time is needed to recognize the words and more time can be spent making meaning. Further, presenting texts to children that parallel their experiences with the world is also important. Our classrooms, libraries, and homes need a diverse range of books where children feel represented and connected. This diversity will help a reader begin the technical skill of reading. With a variety of texts available, it will be much more possible to reach another dimension of literacy where deeper understandings are developed to uncover the various meanings of texts. Readers will begin to peel back the cultural layers of texts. The definition of a text must be broad and encompass more than one single book, and include things like conversations, street signs, newspapers, drama,

media, and much more (Atlantic Canada Professional Development Resource, 2002; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Gruenewald, 2003a; Kuhn et al., 2006; Lo Bianco & Freebody, 1997).

Meaningful contexts are essential to literacy. Literacy gained in meaningful contexts has a greater impact than disconnected situations. One important cueing system used with readers is semantics. Here, teachers draw on prior knowledge to help a student read a text. Therefore context is an important consideration. If readers can identify with or locate themselves in the context of the text, they will more easily be able to activate their prior knowledge. If readers have no connection to the text, it will be very difficult to draw on their own experiences that are so helpful in reading and understanding a text. When meaning is made from reading a text it is done by connecting it to other texts we have read or pictures we have seen, or other experiences we have had. By using texts that connect children to their everyday lives, we enable them to learn to read. If the text is familiar, readers have a much better chance at usefully approaching it (Atlantic Canada Professional Development Resource, 2002; Comber, 1998a; Lemke, 2005; Lo Bianco & Freebody, 1997).

Although the main focus of this thesis is dogs and children's reading, there are other positive impacts connected to literacy. Lo Bianco & Freebody (1997) write that as learners engage in reading and writing activities, effective literacy allows learners to participate in understanding and composing meaningful written, visual, and spoken texts (p. 5). To see any aspect of literacy in isolation is impractical since they are all so closely interwoven and connected. While this section focuses mainly on reading, there cannot

help but be connections among the many other aspects of literacy, including writing. This important connection between reading and writing is possible when reading to dogs and will be explained further in Chapter Three.

Ludwig (2003) writes about “the personal growth approaches to literacy education” where consideration must be given to the private, personal and individual ways people use and grow through reading and writing (p. 1). As a teacher, I too frequently forget about the emotional impact of learning and I need to remind myself often that learning goes well beyond the technical. The majority of my most memorable teaching and learning experiences include deep emotional connections with my students, their families, my colleagues, my teachers, my family and even within me. As my earlier account in this thesis attests, my own early experiences of learning to read are much less about letter and word recognition and are more about close time with my mother. I would not enjoy reading today nearly so much if not for the emotional connection formed early between books, my mother, and me. Cullen & Shaldon (2003) write about the importance of developing a strong relationship in the process of learning to read. There needs to be sharing and emotional support, a sense of inclusion and belonging that will be of huge benefit while learning to read (p. 33). Coupled with reading as a personal experience, it stands to reason that transitioning to reading in a school environment can lose some of this intimacy. I think it is often not recognized that there is a sense of loss in learning to read, especially within the traditional classroom setting. Boldt (2006) finely illustrates this loss through her writings about her son. The time he spent reading in class, which was more than most of his classmates because he was behind, meant a loss of time to

spend with his friends, among other things (p. 284). This point connects with another of Boldt's observations watching her son learn to read. Boldt (2006) writes about the intimacy involved in reading. Before her son started school, his reading experiences had been very intimate, sitting closely with one of his parents while reading gave him a real sense of togetherness. Once at school reading became a very lonely experience as it often took place alone (p. 285). These aspects - intimacy, emotion, and motivation - are pivotal to learning and are explored in more detail in this next section.

#### Part Two: Emotion, Learning and Motivation

To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin (hooks, 1994, p. 13).

#### Emotion

Recognizing the emotional impact of learning is crucial for educators. O'Loughlin (1997) writes, "Learning cannot occur without emotional involvement" (p. 410). Darling-Hammond et al. (2003) state, "...emotions have an impact on learning. They influence our ability to process information and to accurately understand what we encounter. For these reasons, it is important for teachers to create a positive, emotionally safe classroom to provide for the optimal learning of students" (p. 90). Boldt (2006) argues for the need for teachers to put their own and their students' human needs and desires at the center of our practices (p. 304). According to Davis et al. (2008), when there is an emotional impact, the brain is better able to make lasting memories because the neurochemicals that create emotional stimulation also fuel the brain to remember (p. 129). Nurturing emotional development is an important, but often neglected role of schools.

Emotions are formed publicly and collaboratively. Emotions are an essential part of education. Teachers and students need to work on strong relationships so that emotional engagement takes place. According to O'Loughlin (1997), "People only 'matter' or make a difference to each other through emotional involvement, through experiencing the emotional expressions of others who are tied up in various ways with one's own life project" (p. 410). Developing strong relationships assists teachers and students to be better able to "read" each other. Students crave nurturing relationships. In addition, students will read themselves better when education goes beyond academic learning to include social, emotional, and ethical education. Drawing on previous emotional experiences helps students make sense of the emotions people around them are experiencing. All stakeholders in the education system will experience a variety of emotions at different times, from worry to hope, pride to frustration. Emotions are intertwined with cognition and action. With this connection in mind teachers can set up their classrooms to be exciting or dull. Although not exclusively emotional practices, teaching and learning whether positive or negative, calculated or unintentional, are undeniably shaped by emotion. Perhaps the most important emotion educators must cultivate is happiness. Cohen (2006) states, "Happy people are healthier, more successful, and more socially engaged" (p. 203). While educators cannot teach happiness, their approach to learning can profoundly impact the happiness of their students. Positive emotion and pleasure are important criteria en route to happiness (Baker, Terry, & Bridger, 1997; Cohen, 2006; Hargreaves, 2000; Zorn & Boler, 2007).

While positive emotions can assist with learning, negative feelings can do the opposite. A feeling of anxiety can stifle participation from a student. Fear can stop a student in his or her tracks. Students will not feel competent or confident when they are depressed or anxious about learning. These negative emotions may make a student withdraw from classroom activities. Teachers must work hard to reduce situations that make students feel afraid and uncomfortable. When students have difficulty, they are often humiliated and feel like failures. These negative feelings can become self-fulfilling. Further, reading can be seen as a status symbol, especially when students want to avoid humiliation and failure. Reading is often viewed as a predictor of future prospects. It is not only within the classroom where reading is important, but also future possibilities are viewed as positively influenced when you are a good reader. Luke (1998) writes about literacy as a type of cultural capital that students take out into social settings and workplaces (p. 4). Therefore, there is tremendous pressure to read and read well, and if not, there may be long term serious negative consequences. Students very early see themselves as not “measuring up” when they have to consider levelled books and compare themselves to classmates or siblings (Brooks, 2011; Cullen & Shaldon, 2003; Darling-Hammond et al., 2003; Luke, 1998).

Supportive environments with kind and loving educators can help students feel very positive emotions that in turn can make learning a more enjoyable and smooth experience. The personal and caring connection is so important and can lead to humour which many teachers and students embrace at school. Success is enhanced when a child has been made to feel special and has a chance to share. Time spent with familiar others

also is an important factor in learning to read. Motivation to learn increases when there is positive teacher support and positive emotions. Further, when students feel secure, happy, and excited about what they are learning, they are more successful (Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation, 2002; Baker et al., 1997; Cullen & Shaldon, 2003; Darling-Hammond et al., 2003; Meyer & Turner, 2006).

Respecting all that children bring with them to school must go beyond the knowledge to include relationships. Darling-Hammond et al. (2003) write about the importance of teachers fostering positive relationships with their students by being respectful, listening attentively, and responding to the needs and feelings of students. Students need to believe their teachers will manage the classroom in a safe and nurturing way with no risk of humiliation (p. 94). Baker et al. (1997) write about the need for schools to emphasize a sense of belonging. To counteract the alienation many students feel, there must be meaningful involvement in school where the school is seen as personally supportive. A genuine, cherished, caring relationship where each individual feels like an important member of the community is critical (p. 589). Baker et al. (1997) declare, "Children with positive, caring, consistent caretaking relationships develop both the security and the competencies required for success in any social setting, including school" (p. 593).

The focus on relationships with children cannot only be limited to their human relationships, which obviously, are important. If we are to value uniqueness, for many children, relationships with animals are as (or more) important. Ignoring such relationships erases this uniqueness. According to Melson (2001) research on children is

very “humanocentric” and it focuses exclusively on human relationships and suggests that these relationships alone shape development. She argues, instead, for a “biocentric” view of development where connections children have with animals are also considered important in their development (pp. 4-5). If we mimic this sentiment in education, we will recognize the importance animals play in shaping children’s emotional and intellectual development. Therefore, children with pets at home who have literally helped rear them will be valued if we respect what children bring from home. Often, my students have been very direct in their loyalty to and appreciation of their dogs. Slowly, schools are reshaping their definitions of family. However, many children still feel as though their family is not represented in the school. As an integral part of many families, dogs being visible in schools may help bridge the gap where children see pieces of their family being valued, welcomed and respected. Bringing dogs into the education equation in reading programs adds uniqueness to existing programs and reinforces the strength in the human-animal bond.

Over the years, watching the children in my classrooms, I have seen firsthand how acceptance and understanding can encourage a child in his or her journey of learning. Without it, there is little desire to try. Students who do not feel accepted or understood more quickly shut down. Therefore learning environments must be open and inviting where students feel welcomed, embraced, understood, and wanted. Similarly, empathy is a crucial learning experience. Darling-Hammond et al. (2003) write, “For productive exchanges in the classroom and in life, we need not only to be aware of our own feelings, we also need to be aware of other’s feelings. Empathy is the ability to recognize emotions

in others and to have compassion when others react emotionally” (p. 93). Students and teachers need to be moved by the experiences of others. Developing the ability to empathize helps students connect with others, become better listeners, and be more respectful and sensitive to those around us. Empathy moves learners to understand texts from our own and then others’ perspectives. It gives space to think from a variety and sometimes even conflicting perspectives (Brooks, 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2003; Lewison, Seely Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002).

Gruenewald (2003a) writes about the importance of empathetic experience. Such experiences will lead a student to question, act, and find out more. Further he argues for the necessity of children to connect ecologically. Without this connection to and understanding and love of our Earth, we will have no desire to protect it (p. 8). Animals can be the connection to our environment. If a child does not get exposure to animals at home because of things like fear or allergies or costs, we miss out on key opportunities to connect ecologically. If dogs are part of learning it may present an ecological experience not yet had by some children.

Engaging in an ecological experience helps develop another crucial process of learning, transformation. Learning should cause changes within ourselves and also persuade us to make change in the people and places around us. When emotions are dismissed it impacts transformation. The possibility for respect and care is lost when emotions are ignored. Change happens when respect and care are evident. Many peoples’ lives are enriched and changed from the presence and support of a canine. We need to see learning as a journey and that more important than facts is finding what helps us live well

within ourselves, with our environment, and each other. This journey should also help us be peaceful and just in our decisions and actions. Change is an integral part of learning. Adventure should be a key part of learning too. We need to challenge and be challenged. For language development, there needs to be challenging experiences. We need to be creative and to have vision. Our own ideas, identities, and possibilities should transform as we are transformed by our learning. In Chapter Three I will further explore how dogs assist in these transformations (Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation, 2002; Brooks, 2011; Lemke, 2005; O’Sullivan, 2008).

### Learning and Motivation

Learning and motivation cannot be separated. The motivation to read and write begins early. It is critical that interesting materials be presented to children in their early school years. Students must be immersed in the widest range of texts possible. The word *text* refers to print-based materials, but goes beyond print to also include videos, songs, websites, and much more. According to the Atlantic Canada Professional Development Resource (2002), “The definition of text has evolved from one single book to today’s definition where it can mean a book, a conversation, a piece of music or art, a stop sign, role playing, drama, movement, newspaper, television commercial, etc” (p. 5). Literacy activities must be worthwhile and purposeful not only in school, but before-school and outside of school. These materials must also be diverse, suitable, and locally selected in order to develop the motivation to read and write. One of many ways to enhance motivation is through the use of everyday texts that include things like signs, packages, and fliers - items that permeate our surroundings - on screens, in shopping centers, and

homes. By bringing things like fliers into the classroom, children not only get opportunities to think and talk critically about advertising, portrayals of stereotypes, and more, by blending these texts with things to which children can relate like toys, food they eat, music they enjoy, it makes for an enjoyable experience too. Students see their everyday lives with a different perspective (Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation, 2002; Comber, 1998a; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Lewison et al., 2002; Lo Bianco & Freebody, 1997).

A colleague of mine often tells her students who say they hate reading that they have not yet found the right book. It is a challenging quest sometimes to match students and books in ways that enrich. Literature-based learning is vital. The role of literature cannot be ignored. Readers need good writing with which they can engage. There will be a stronger motivation to read and write with suitable literature. Therefore it is essential that a wide variety of resources be made available. There must be a wide range of print resources including textbooks, novels, magazines, newspapers, and reference materials (Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation, 2002; Lo Bianco & Freebody, 1997).

Approaches to learning must take into account the uniqueness of each learner. Children are each motivated by different stimuli. According to Giroux (1982), not only must curriculum be deeply personal, it must also recognize individual uniqueness (p. 105). It is troubling to think that much of the current assessment practices revolve around standardized tests and a prescribed curriculum. This poses huge challenges to educators to recognize individual uniqueness and manipulate the curriculum so that it can be personal for each student. Expecting children to progress at the same rate and to not follow their

interests is very troubling. It is extremely difficult to meet individual student needs when educators focus exclusively on standards. Educators, districts, and governmental agencies must be cognizant and critical of a heavy focus on standardized tests that do little to motivate learning. National benchmarks and standardized testing have the potential to erase much innovation in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Many of the great ways children learn and are motivated to learn cannot be demonstrated with strictly pencil and paper activities which also do not allow for flexible adapting, adjusting, and implementing of curriculum. A standardized test does not present diversity and variety in text types. Another concern with rigid benchmarks that contradicts the idea of diverse and personalized curriculum is the giant question of who sets these benchmarks. To enable participation in school and to help each student feel welcomed, embraced, and celebrated, benchmarks likely will leave many feeling left out or unvalued. These feelings will shut down motivation and stymie a desire to learn. When teachers are so strictly controlled and regulated by centralised and standardized curriculum, the ability to be creative, to present a rich, full, engaging, and exciting curriculum becomes seriously compromised (Cullen & Shaldon, 2003; Lankshear, n.d.; Lewison et al., 2002; Luke, 1998; Luke & van Kraayenoord, 1998).

Experience-based learning is an essential motivation. To really motivate children to learn, real world experiences from within the classroom and beyond are necessary. Learning is facilitated best by topic learning where first-hand experience is connected. Respecting what children bring to school is vital to learning. It is a serious crisis when home, school, and life literacies are separated. It must be recognized that the process of

learning in school is a continuation of a process that begins naturally and informally at home and within communities. It is crucial to develop a link between home and school (Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation, 2002; Boldt, 2006; Comber, 1998b; Cullen & Shaldon, 2003; Lo Bianco & Freebody, 1997).

Cultural contexts and connections cannot be ignored. Too often, educators feel tremendous pressure to cover curriculum and prepare students for standardized tests. In the rush and panic, we forget who our students are and even minimize their capacity to learn and contribute. According to Delpit (2003), "...we must learn who our children are – their lived culture, their interests, and their intellectual, political, and historical legacies" (p. 20). When educators blindly follow the path to standardized testing and ignore who their students are and what they bring, they can fall into a trap of believing some students cannot learn. Delpit (2003) writes, "Only a consciously devised, continuous program that develops vocabulary in the context of real experiences, provides rigorous instruction, connects new information to the cultural frameworks that children bring to school, and assumes that the children are brilliant and capable, and teaches accordingly, can" (p. 17).

When learners do not perceive themselves to be successful readers and writers, there are long-term negative consequences. According to Lo Bianco & Freebody (1997) when learners think they are poor readers and writers, future educational activities are at risk. Adults have incredible difficulty moving past their negative self-perception even when they are actually capable. If their memories of earlier learning experiences are viewed as failures they face huge obstacles in their adult years in literacy activities.

Without early, positive motivational literacy experiences, learners will actively avoid literacy in the future (pp. 81- 82).

In order to foster learning, we must promote and encourage relationships, interdependence, and independence. At every age and stage, there must be opportunities to read aloud, participate in shared and guided reading, and independent reading. There should be individual, paired, small, and large group involvement. Shared reading helps readers learn how language works. It presents an opportunity for the reader to ask questions about things that might not make sense or do not sound quite right. Literacy cannot only be about the individual. It must also be about others and the environment and all of the things that come together in an intricate caring community. Apprenticeship and peer learning can be very effective and motivational. Learning from one another, cooperating and collaborating, is invaluable (Atlantic Canada Professional Development Resource, 2002; Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation, 2002; Baker et al., 1997; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Lankshear, n.d ; Lemke, 2005).

Another necessary ingredient to motivation and learning is interactivity. Fountas & Pinnell (1996) write that learning is a social practice. Children need frequent opportunities to work with pairs and small groups and will understand better when they have an opportunity to talk with others while learning (p. 43). Many of our daily encounters are interactive. Mimicking this in the classroom is another motivational tool. According to Lo Bianco & Freebody (1997), literacy learning environments must be highly interactive. They must also be collaborative (p. 73). Schools must collaborate with families to enhance the learning environment for all. There is tremendous value in family

and community participation in literacy education (p. 76). In my experience it can occasionally be a challenge to convince family members they are welcome in the school and are valued members of the school community. The non-judgmental, calm, inviting presence of a dog, which will be explained in detail in Chapter Three, can act as a bridge to family members and create a more welcoming space for people previously reluctant to enter. Further, in Chapter Three, the beneficial collaboration between a reader and a therapy dog is explored.

## Chapter Three

### Review of the Literature: Therapy Dogs, Reading Therapy Dogs

#### Introduction

Dog-assisted reading is a relatively new practice; however, therapy dogs have been helping humans for decades. This chapter reviews the literature on therapy dogs generally, and reading dogs, specifically. Part One: *Therapy Dogs* reviews the literature that supports the therapeutic benefits a dog provides and explores therapy dogs in a wide variety of settings and purposes. Part Two: *Reading Therapy Dogs* specifically examines the potential of a child-dog relationship to help struggling readers.

#### Part One: Therapy Dogs

Although animal assisted activities and therapy are not limited only to dogs, the focus in this writing will be on dogs. People who own or love dogs do not need research to validate the physical, emotional, and spiritual lift the presence of a dog can bring. However, for people who have not had the pleasure of the companionship of a dog, the research is powerful and convincing. Buoyed by this research, the increasing use of therapy dogs in hospitals, full time care facilities, libraries, and schools is enriching peoples' lives. Dogs help us feel loved and supported. They help us to heal and to learn. The list of ways dogs help humans is long and growing.

Simply petting a dog has profound benefits for humans. Cesar Millan (2007) writes about the release of beneficial hormones like prolactin, oxytocin, and phenyl ethylamine that are released within minutes of petting a dog (p. 242). Pardy-Ghent (2009)

writes about humans' blood pressure lowering while holding or petting an animal. Stress, tension, feelings of loneliness and depression are also reduced when humans interact with animals (pp. 67-68). Connecting with nature is critical to our well-being. Bonding with a dog reinforces our connection to the environment. According to Norman (2006), the positive effects of nature are numerous. After operations, patients heal quicker when they have a view of trees instead of blank walls. They also need less pain medication. Hospital patients feel less anxiety when they have plants around. Children's hyperactivity can be tempered when they are given access to nature (pp. 16-17). Davis et al. (2008) also refer to this important connection that teaching must be about creating something new through relationships. It is critical to meet up with each other, our pasts, and the environment (p. 13). I believe dogs have a tremendous offering in helping us make these meaningful connections.

Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) comes in many forms and benefits countless people and populations. According to Chandler (2001), it was in 1962 that the first documented integration of animal-assisted therapy into clinical psychology was credited. Child psychologist, Boris Levinson, brought his dog Jingles to some of his therapy sessions. With his dog present, he made easier progress with a patient (p. 1). Dogs have been instrumental in improving the quality of lives for the elderly, patients with terminal illnesses, hospital patients, children, people affected by disasters, inmates in correctional facilities, people affected by seizures, and patients in psychotherapy sessions.

### Dogs and Elder Care

According to Granger and Kogan (2006), animal interactions with the elderly have proven physiological benefits like decreased blood pressure and increased survival rate of coronary care patients (p. 271). Yet, there are much more than physical benefits. Granger and Kogan (2006) explain that the elderly have an improved sense of self-worth when they feed, walk, or brush animals. This care of animals helps increase self-respect as well as a feeling of independence (p. 271). As well, communication skills are enhanced with the use of AAT. Granger and Kogan (2006) add that social interaction is improved with the presence of an animal. Elderly patients have more opportunities to practice their social skills when in the company of an animal because the presence of the animal makes the communication situation feel less threatening. In the face of memory deficits, nonverbal communication becomes even more important (p. 271). The nonverbal acceptance and communication of animals is highly beneficial.

Dog therapy not only benefits the patients in nursing homes, but also has profound impacts on the staff. Beck and Katcher (1996) write about the often depressing and demoralizing feeling staff can have sometimes when working in institutions where no one is really expected to improve. However when dogs arrive they help staff feel more optimism that inspires them to treat the patients better (p. 130). Another challenge for elderly patients in care is often the lack of visitors and family contacts. Visits from a dog operate two-fold. One, they are exposed to visitors both canine and human, but Beck and Katcher (1996) explain that animals can serve as a replacement for grandchildren who do

not visit. Or, even better, the presence of the animal may encourage some grandchildren to visit more frequently (p. 131).

#### Dogs Helping Humans Cope With Mobility, Illness, and Death

Dogs have long been of service to people with vision impairments and a multitude of mobility challenges and physical issues. Dogs restore a sense of independence to people who have often had to rely on others to meet their basic needs. Sakson (2009) writes of the whole host of commands dogs can learn to help humans. Dogs can pick up a dropped wallet, turn off and on lights, push elevator buttons, bring medication, and retrieve clothing for their human partners to be able to get dressed and so much more. These kinds of jobs would otherwise have to be done by a family member, nurse, or hired caretaker. The dog gives freedom to someone who otherwise may not have been able to be on their own for any amount of time. Besides these physical aids, they provide companionship and fill emotional needs too (pp. 107-108).

Therapy dogs have proven to be lifesavers with people who suffer from seizures. Dogs have an incredible calming ability with people who have frequent seizures. Dogs will stay close by their human during a seizure standing or lying next to the person sometimes licking their face or hands during and after the seizure. Not knowing when a seizure will occur creates intense anxiety in a person. Originally, service dogs were trained to help people cope with a seizure. This practice led to the discovery that dogs can anticipate a seizure that allows the person to prepare. This warning actually led to a reduction in the frequency of seizures presumably because the person, knowing they were about to have a seizure, became less anxious (Hart, 2006; Sakson, 2009).

Animal assisted therapy has been instrumental for people with a terminal illness. According to Granger and Kogan (2006) the unconditional acceptance an animal shares helps caretakers provide better support to their patients. Death makes most people uncomfortable and, even though unintentional; caretakers can sometimes increase anxiety and fear in their patients. A dog's presence calms both the caretaker and the patient allowing a person with a terminal illness to work through his or her feelings (p. 272). Further, Granger and Kogan (2006) add that a patient with a terminal illness can be helpfully distracted from his or her own illness when caring for another living creature. Animals can help patients feel less fear, despair, loneliness, and stress. Hospital patients benefit from the nonjudgmental presence of a dog. After an illness or accident, physical differences can make the patient feel self-conscious. Often patients will sense that these changes may make other people uncomfortable. Holding or petting a living creature helps people to relax and feel enjoyment (pp. 272- 273).

Therapy Dogs International has several programs designed to be of service and therapy to people. One of these programs is called *The Final Visit*. This program is meant to help people with the grieving process. The connection with the Therapy dog and handler is sometimes made during visits in the patient's final stages of life. *The Final Visit* involves requesting a Therapy dog team come to the funeral home. With unconditional love, a mournful atmosphere can be lightened, and a sense of peace brought to individuals during a difficult time. Family members are consoled by the steady and unwavering companionship provided by a dog. It can be very comforting to stroke the fur

of a serene dog. This can be a consoling experience for the family members and friends as well as the Therapy dog team (Therapy Dogs International, 2009e).

### Dogs and Children

There are many benefits of animal assisted activity and animal assisted therapy in schools and for children. Children are better equipped to control and regulate their own behaviour when engaged in Animal Assisted Therapy. Children are able to express their love while also learning empathy toward other living creatures. When children have success in animal assisted therapy sessions, their self-esteem improves which boosts their confidence and makes approaching new tasks easier. Animals not only hold children's attention, but also direct it outward in a learning setting where therapy animals are present. It is critical to calm a child first. Agitation and aggression diminish when their attention is focused and directed outward. Obviously this focus then creates a better environment for teaching and learning. Animal assisted therapy dramatically impacts children who suffer aggression or who are troubled emotionally and adolescents who have severe learning difficulties. Youth experience less agitation and are less aggressive when exposed to animal assisted therapy. They cooperate better with their teachers, are enthusiastic and engaged in their learning, and are better able to control their behaviour in a regular classroom setting (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Granger & Kogan, 2006; Hart, 2006).

Anger issues seem more and more common in today's classrooms. Dogs can be instrumental anger management consultants. Harbolt and Ward (as cited in Fine 2006) discuss Project Second Chance where teenage offenders are paired with shelter dogs who are being given a second chance to be adopted. As a result, the youth learn empathy,

kindness, and the acceptance of responsibility. Inevitably, they learn that compassion and consistency are much more effective for training dogs rather than aggression and anger (p. 195).

Children who are forced to flee their homes to escape abuse can benefit from therapy dogs. Therapy Dogs International offers a program called *Shelters* where dogs and handlers visit shelters. The program is best explained through a conversation between a teenage boy and a handler.

‘Why do you come here?’ asked a teenage boy as he was petting a Therapy Dog with both hands.

‘How do you feel when you pet my dog?’ answered the dog’s handler.

The boy smiled, ‘I feel good.’

‘That’s why we come.’ (Therapy Dogs International, 2009f).

A friendly paw can be a welcome distraction. Counsellors are present during the visits because often, while petting the dogs, people are able to share their stories. The dogs offer unconditional love and support while the handlers support the dogs (Therapy Dogs International, 2009f).

### Dogs and Trauma

The reality of the violence some children experience while at school is devastating. Dogs have even been a comfort to children after school shootings. For example, Cindy Ehlers of Eugene, Oregon took her dog, Bear, to schools traumatized by school shootings. In 1998, they attended Thurston High School and again in 1999 to Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado (Chandler, 2001, p. 1). Similarly, Therapy

Dogs International offers a program called *Disaster Stress Relief* where dogs have been a tremendous comfort and support during disasters. The first experience for Therapy Dogs International took place after the Oklahoma City bombing. About twenty dogs and their handlers responded after the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal building in 1995. This, their first experience working in a terrorist situation, proved the importance and necessity of having therapy dogs available for people affected by disaster (Therapy Dogs International, 2009d).

Family Assistance Centers were set up after September 11, 2001 for people who lost loved ones or suffered injury or a loss of property. Therapy Dogs International members and their Therapy Dogs volunteered at these centers in New York City, New York, Liberty State Park in Jersey City, New Jersey, and in Washington, D.C. While people are still in shock, it is often the presence of the dog that allows them to talk. The handler then is able to perform a triage service alerting the appropriate health care worker to assist. Professionals, like police officers, for example, working through such disasters, have their own pain and Therapy Dogs assist them too. The physical comfort derived from hugging a dog can help a worker get through another minute, another hour. It was the work that was done in Oklahoma City and after September 11, 2001 that was the impetus Therapy Dogs International to develop the *Disaster Stress Relief* program. This program was needed and used after Hurricane Katrina struck in October 2005 (Therapy Dogs International, 2009d).

### Dogs in Prison Situations

Animals have proven to be invaluable in prison situations. Granger and Kogan (2006) describe a very successful program that takes place at the Washington Correction Center for Women (WCCW) in Gig Harbor, Washington. Working with Tacoma Community College, shelter dogs are trained to be service dogs for people in the community. The *Prison Pet Partnership* has three main benefits. The inmates have improved self-esteem while also earning college credits and skills for the workplace. Dogs that would have otherwise been euthanized now have a second chance. The recipients of the service dog also benefit in life changing ways gaining independence and companionship. To date, one hundred percent of the inmates who participated in the program have found employment upon release. In the past three years, none of the people who were involved in the *Prison Pet Partnership* have reoffended. Similar programs have been developed in Newfoundland and Labrador with this one as the inspiration (Granger, & Kogan, p. 274), including at inmate facilities in Clarendville, Stephenville, and Bishop's Falls.

### Dogs and Psychotherapy

Millions of people suffer from invisible disabilities. Psychiatric service dogs are trained to partner with persons living with mental health disabilities. Dogs can be trained to assist people with disabilities like panic attacks, anxiety, or depression. The animal becomes a safe zone enabling people to overcome obstacles keeping them from leaving their houses, or being in crowded spaces. Psychiatric service dogs are becoming more common. They can help someone refocus when not paying attention to surroundings and

even bring handlers their medication (Becker, 2002; Esnayra, 2007; Wallwork, 2007). Dogs learn to display an unusual behaviour when his or her human partner shows symptoms of mental illness. Each dog's behaviour varies from nudging an elbow to whining or nibbling a handler's fingers. One of the primary functions of a dog is to help the human build insight into his or her own mental illness. The dog reacts to changes in the handler that allows the handler to better regulate his or her reactions and behaviours. A psychiatric service dog is used in combination with an existing mental health treatment plan not as a replacement for it (Becker, 2002; Esnayra, 2007; Wallwork, 2007).

Establishing a bond under any circumstance can be challenging. In a situation between a therapist and patient, it is often very difficult especially if the patient is attempting to reveal very private or painful events. Animals help people feel safe, loved, and worthwhile which makes them invaluable in therapy. A dog can be instrumental in assisting the patient and therapist to be more relaxed. The presence of an animal in a therapy session makes the session feel less threatening. The unconditional acceptance a dog provides opens doors for a patient. Holding or stroking an animal helps patients remember and share information about their past (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Wilkes, 2009).

To be able to confide in someone and to have privacy protected are very important qualities in a friend, family member, or therapist. Words can be a barrier. Words have been a major cause of depression and hopelessness in many patients which makes it difficult to approach people. Animals bridge the gap because there is no fear of being hurt by an animal's words. When there is no trust, it is often impossible to reveal one self. Dogs are invaluable for this reason too. Children gravitate toward dogs because of the

confidentiality and not needing to fear the dog will repeat anything said. A child appreciates the sympathetic listening ear of a dog and is especially comforted by the fact that a dog cannot tell (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Mallon, 1994).

The presence of a dog is not only beneficial to the patient, but the therapist experiences benefits too. Physiologically the staff involved with dogs experience changes. Barker, Kniseley, McCain, and Best (2005), inspired by observing healthcare workers smiling, petting, talking to, and briefly playing with therapy animals, completed a pilot study with twenty health care workers. Optimally, forty–five minutes with a therapy dog produced dramatically lower stress levels through measurements of serum and salivary cortisol levels; although even after five minutes with a therapy dog, stress levels decreased (pp. 715, 722, 726). In addition to the physiological benefits, therapists simply felt better too. According to Wilkes (2009), psychologists reported feeling more comforted, grounded, relaxed, productive, softer, and creative when in the presence of a therapy animal (p. 86).

Dog therapy, generally, has been life changing and life saving for countless people in numerous different environments. The power of a dog to support us in times of need is an incredible gift. Part Two will explore specifically how dog therapy can be implemented to benefit readers.

#### Part Two: Reading Therapy Dogs

Learning to read is crucial. The elementary school curriculum demands print-based alphabetic literacy and it is an essential component of successful engagement with the contemporary world. Assessment practices across grades and subjects most often stem

from and assume a certain level of reading and writing. In the Atlantic Canada Professional Development Resource (2002), which shapes the English Language Arts programs in Atlantic Canada, it is stated that every subject area at every grade level requires reading. Especially at the early grades, school success is equated with reading success. How well a child is reading by the end of grade three is a huge predictor of the success he or she will have in school (p. 5). Therefore, when a student struggles with reading, they are at a huge disadvantage in every subject. If a student cannot read directions, their likelihood of success is greatly diminished. The means of communicating knowledge in schools relies greatly on reading and writing. When literacy capabilities are inadequate, access to knowledge across the entire curriculum is compromised. Long term support across all ages and all areas of the curriculum is essential.

Sadly, reading is also competitive from an early age. By grade one many children realize the educational “value” assigned to the letter on their book. Their reading levels are visible and there is a quick and painful division of who is reading and at what level. Schools and society generally do not always fairly reward talent and effort. Early reading and writing is important, but other qualities must also count. In schools, there is often a hierarchy of talents – print-literacy based academics first and then others like music, athletic ability, and visual art might also be valued. Even within literacy, alphabetic literacy eclipses other forms. There is a hierarchy that labels students and their abilities as valued or not valued. Caution must be exercised when alphabetic literacy is placed on a pedestal over all other capabilities, knowledge, and interests. To incorporate other modes like singing or drawing, not only do we show appreciation and value of other capabilities,

it also positively impacts how well we read and make sense of what we have read (Comber, 1998b; Gale & Densmore, 2000; Lemke, 2005; Lo Bianco & Freebody, 1997). By placing such a heavy emphasis on alphabetic literacy, we counteract the important emotional aspect of education discussed in Chapter Two. If children are led to believe that without a strong ability in alphabetical literacy, they are less likely to succeed, we have laid a frightening foundation for their future. Teaching Grade Six, I have met many sad children who have been labeled non-readers, or weak readers and their other talents and abilities have been overlooked.

Meaningful engagement with the text is critical for reading skills to develop and what it means to engage meaningfully is different for everyone. When children read to dogs, often, they look for books about dogs. According to Luke and Freebody (1999), an integral practice learners must perform is to analyze texts critically, realizing that they characterize particular points of view while silencing others (p. 5). Children inherently know about connection and inclusion. Children believe dogs will be more interested in books about themselves. Feeling a sense of belonging is critical to themselves so it must also be so for dogs. Seeking out books about dogs so they feel represented opens a door to critical literacy - challenging curriculums, and its related book lists that are not representative of variety and diversity. Children can learn to question and challenge texts that exclude them or their families. Children seem to know this before we try to teach it. This revelation while with a dog can be reinforced so children continue to look for themselves in the texts they see.

The R.E.A.D. (Reading Education Assistance Dogs) program, as outlined in the next chapter, has reported that interaction with an animal often helps a child forget their limitations. Low self-esteem sometimes halts a child from reading with a human. The same child will more willingly read with an animal. Rather than sitting with an adult, often being constantly corrected, children with a dog have increased confidence and are more willing to take a risk. While a dog listens quietly, there is no risk of over-correction and a child can proceed at her or his own pace. This helps correct the problem that Hargreaves (2006) writes about. Children's confidence improves in the presence of a dog because the reader need not fear being criticized or corrected (p. 1).

The benefits from reading aloud are high, but so too is the stress - especially when reading in the classroom or to an adult. When in the presence of a dog, this stress diminishes. Stress is reduced when in the presence of a mellow companion animal. This is evident from physiological measures. There is a reduction in heart rate and lowered blood pressure that would indicate that a dog could help temper stressful situations. When a child reads aloud in an animal assisted therapy session, blood pressure and heart rate lower. Even a trip to the doctor or similar stressful situation is proven less stressful when in the company of a dog (Friesen, 2010; Jalongo et al., 2004; Kaymen, 2005).

Traditional forms of reading instruction and intervention strategies are not reaching many readers. It can be very stressful and intimidating to read aloud to adults when it is difficult and challenging. On the other hand, students who are reading at or above grade level still might not feel challenged, excited or enthused about reading. It would be wise to find alternative methods to reach all children. In my experience, many

struggling readers continue to struggle despite traditional interventions. And, even many children who are not having difficulty report that they do not enjoy the experience of reading. Nothing changes if nothing changes and we owe it to our children to try options. The presence of a dog can greatly diminish the feeling of intimidation that is present when a child reads only to another human. It also would add an element of excitement, companionship and challenge to a child not experiencing technical reading difficulties but looking for something more from reading. All parties involved in dog assisted reading programs from the reader to the caregiver to the teachers, and literacy specialists, all report positive reactions. They agree that it is helpful, fun, and less intimidating to read to a dog than to read in a group or to another person (Hargreaves, 2006; Kaymen, 2005).

Increased confidence and self-esteem are two huge benefits that dog-assisted reading programs can produce, but maybe most important is the element we generally lose as we age - fun! Comber (1998b) writes about the pleasure principle in relation to literacy. Some teachers are seeking pleasurable literacy experiences with positive results (p. 19). Dog-assisted reading programs boast a high pleasure factor. One participant, as Bueche (2003) reports, said it best: "But, best of all, the students regard reading with their canine companion as fun. As one second grader in a canine reading therapy session said, 'I really scared that big black dog the other day!' 'How?' asked the volunteer. 'I read him a ghost story,' the child replied" (p. 46). Learners are usually more engaged when learning is playful. According to Davis et al. (2008), an important element considered by employees in workplace satisfaction is play. When creativity, innovation, and problem solving are present in the workplace there is a much greater level of contentment and

engagement at work (p. 84). Kaymen (2005) writes that animal assisted therapy participants – children, teachers, and caregivers - all agree the program is fun and exciting (p. 33). In addition, Kaymen (2005) states that the act of reading is enjoyable when done with a dog because it is a different and new experience (p. 34).

According to Harrington (n.d.), many adults can recall a feeling of dread when as a child they were asked to read aloud in class. For some, this can develop into a serious problem called *aliteracy* where students develop basic reading skills, but dislike, or refuse to read (p. 1). Teaching grade six, I have met many students who fit this description. They are turned off reading because most of their experiences have been negative and stressful. Harrington (n.d.) also states that when a reader feels afraid, shy, or embarrassed to read, the best way to correct the problem is through a fun, empowering environment (p. 1).

Many educators might think that being in the presence of a dog would cause less focus and students would be less engaged in reading. The opposite is actually true. Research shows that students who read with dogs were more engaged, focused and alert than they were at other times. According to learning theory, it is more likely for an activity to reoccur when it is pleasurable and self-reinforcing. It is a powerful ripple effect that the more students read, the greater their confidence and skill level. If children find the experience of reading with a dog to be enjoyable, they will be more encouraged to read and the more they read the better they get and so on. The amount of reading students complete directly influences their achievement (Kaymen, 2005; Kruger & Serpell, 2006; Kuhn et al., 2006).

Love, admiration, and trust are essential qualities found in a relationship between a human and an animal. The bond between an animal and human benefits both and is a reciprocal interaction. The unconditional love a dog can bring lifts people up and helps them feel accepted and loved. Unlimited understanding spills from a wide-eyed, silent, attentive animal. Often the children who need this understanding the most are the least understood. A dog will not judge or criticize. Because of the nonjudgmental environment present when children interact with dogs, the interaction is much more natural and likely to occur especially with children with injured self-esteem. The likelihood of a child with low self-esteem reading in this nonjudgmental environment is much greater. It has been my experience that many students who struggle with reading face judgment from their peers, teachers, and families. Their already low self-esteem plummets dangerously with traditional reading interventions (Granger & Granger, n.d.; Melson, 2001; Newlin, 2003).

Collaboration is vital for support to be successful. For example, there is a beautiful report about two shelters joining forces to help each other in need. Bideawee Animal shelter in New York provides reading support to a homeless shelter. Children at the shelter read to a once homeless dog. Learning to read takes a back seat when you are worried about where you will sleep and if you will have food. With the loving support of a dog, children are temporarily distracted from the stress of living in a shelter (Bideawee, 2007).

It is disturbing when students are seen as inherently lacking which is often the case in our school system. Gale and Densmore (2000) write that, often, students must

qualify for support by demonstrating formally that they lack basic skills (p. 12). Additionally, according to Philpott (2002), students in Newfoundland and Labrador must be formally assessed and identified with exceptionality before services may begin to support them through the learning process. The Department of Education has diagnostic criteria for each category of exceptionality they have outlined (p. 3). It is incredibly frustrating for educators and unfair to learners when there are additional human resources in a school like Special Education teachers who may only work with those students on their formally identified "list". It is time for change. Any child, and I would argue every child, needs extra support at some time or another throughout his or her education. In the instance of reading, some children may benefit from a few sessions with a dog while others may require longer time frames. There needs to be flexibility and open access. A dog will not care if a child has a label or not; they will happily sit and be read to by any one child who showers them with affection and kindness.

Along with the kindness a dog will unconditionally provide, being around them teaches us to be more patient and kind. According to Melson (2001), animals around children can help the child become more gentle and considerate (p. 76). Further, Melson (2001) writes that with school-based violence reported more frequently, teaching respect for animals also teaches kindness and helps temper some of the rage some students are bringing to school (p. 193). Patience is also learned while children observe the handler with her or his dog. Watching the handler while he or she is patient and calm can help a child learn these same values. According to Sakson (2009), West Virginia started a Golden Rule Assistance Dog Program where "at-risk" teens worked with golden

retrievers training them to be service dogs. The teens were fascinated by the dogs and were more than willing to help with their training. When the dogs were puppies, the youth began working with them and continued for two years. The youth learned “emotion regulation” - when to be stern and when to be overflowing with praise. The children learned patience, kindness, and praise, all from working with a dog (Sakson, p. 104). With schools and administrators being challenged to deliver effective anti-bullying programs, dog-assisted reading would have a ripple effect into many other areas. Already, programs like *Roots of Empathy* are showing incredible promise. I think the greater the range and availability of programs promoting empathy, the better progress we will make in addressing issues of bullying.

Another beautiful possibility for participants in dog-assisted reading programs is the opportunity for mentorship. Often, traditional reading intervention strategies involve permanent pull out scenarios where children serve an educational ‘life sentence’ for an early childhood reading challenge. Once identified as struggling in learning, it seems too frequently that the situation for a student is deemed hopeless. According to Lo Bianco and Freebody (1997), early literacy education cannot be viewed as a vaccine that will protect against future difficulties. Literacy development must be ongoing. Opportunities must be provided to learners for on-going literacy development and educators must be cognizant of the fact that children learn differently. All teachers must pay attention to children’s growing literacy (pp. 107-108). With dog-assisted reading programs, there is this continued focus on literacy even after a child may have improved their reading skill. Reading with a dog can have a huge impact on self-respect. The SHARE a Book program

works with teachers, reading specialists, and librarians in Novato, California. According to Harrington (n.d.), roles can change within the program. The reader becomes the teacher when asked to explain to his or her canine partner what was just read (p. 2). In my experience, students with reading difficulties are diagnosed and then set up for special education intervention a few times a cycle and remain there throughout their entire primary and elementary experience. The dog-assisted reading program at Alderman Elementary School in Wilmington, NC has had tremendous success. Newlin (2003) writes that most students improve their reading levels by at least two grade levels over a school year. Many do so well that they become mentors and help other children. They bring them to the library, introduce them to the dogs, and help them choose books (p. 43). By being a mentor, their literacy development continues.

Some readers who struggle have the money to hire a private tutor or to attend costly after-school programs where they can get individual or small group support that might be helpful in their reading development. I have had some students who have experienced some success with private tutors, or other private for-profit programs. Yet, many students who struggle with reading cannot avail of services such as these. With dog-assisted reading programs, the expensive barriers previously mentioned are greatly reduced. Dogs and handlers volunteer their time. For example, the SHARE a book program offers free sessions at the library. Most often a dog-assisted reading program is offered through a school or library so access is more easily available to more children. According to Bueche (2003), the READ program is open to anyone (p.46).

Communication is critical in order to begin to understand children's needs. Students enter classrooms with differing capacities to communicate. Schools do not take into account these differences. Schools often do not find a way for things to be done differently so a child can communicate her or his needs. Kaymen (2005) writes about one particular student who frequently refused to speak to anyone and recovery from this was often impossible. The trigger for his withdrawal was usually unknown. Inevitably he would end up at the office. There, the student would sit unresponsive for hours. The guidance counsellor happened to have her dog with her at work one day and when the dog, Peter, entered the office, he nosed the student's elbow. The student responded by cuddling up on the floor with Peter and sobbing. Ten minutes later the student was able to return to class and the teacher reported that the rest of the day went well. The student's future behaviour was restructured based on this positive experience (pp. 16-17). Too often, in school, there is such a limited view on how communication should appear (Gale & Densmore, 2000; Kaymen, 2005).

Often there are children in classrooms who are always alone or who are rarely embraced by other students. The presence of a dog acts as an icebreaker and brings children together who might not have otherwise interacted. Reading therapy with a dog would allow for closeness with another being, thereby bringing back a sense of togetherness in the learning and reading experience. To help create a climate where differences are honoured and celebrated, a dog can be instrumental. Zorn & Boler (2007) write about the emotional distance between people that is often caused by differences of culture and class (p. 139). Dogs help level the playing field. According to Jalongo et al.

(2004), the goals of inclusion are often supported well with the presence of trained therapy dogs and service dogs. A child without disabilities was ten times more likely to interact with another student who had disabilities when a dog was with the student rather than alone (p. 10). The dog gives the student cultural capital and a bridge to others. Faver and Bradley (2009) write that animals allow us to be ourselves and in so doing can help people find their voice. They adjust to our emotions and stay connected which helps to relax and to diminish fear of being judged or abandoned (p. 26). Dogs do not care about rank. They simply delight in one's presence. Children, especially, deserve this open acceptance. Since many children find being with a dog to be a positive emotional experience, their word memory and recall would be enhanced when reading with a dog. Boldt (2006) writes about the learning alliance that can happen between a teacher and student when the teacher can hold the student's emotional expression, even and especially, the negative feelings like anger (pp. 295-296). A dog can bear many negative feelings and be actively empathetic thereby enhancing the learning environment.

According to Street (2003) curriculum can be so greatly enriched if we connect formal education and "ordinary life" (p. 83). With dogs playing such a huge role in families, for many, they are indeed a valued, appreciated, and respected part of "ordinary life". Including them in our teaching practices would, for many, enrich learning. This opportunity for enrichment is especially important when according to Stack (2006), thirty seven per cent of Canadian students said school is not a place they like to go. It begs the question of whether students will continue in their education if school is not a place they want to be (p. 63). I think that this statistic is alarming, much more alarming than low

standardized testing scores and yet it is not talked about or addressed. If we can make school a more fulfilling and meaningful place to be, as is the intent of dog-assisted reading programs, perhaps school would become a place that students would want to go. Although this following example from Newlin (2003) takes place in a library, it has implications for a classroom. Newlin (2003) writes about a second grade student reading at a kindergarten level who used to drag himself into the library. He didn't like to read and he had behavioural problems in the classroom. Within a month of reading with a dog the student became very comfortable with one of the dogs and would pet the dog while he read (p. 2). Simply seeing or petting a dog can transform attitudes and dispositions.

Chandler (2001) outlines many benefits of AAA and AAT in the classroom. Goals for students in school classrooms using AAT and AAA include:

- Gaining knowledge about animals;

- Learning humane animal care;

- Motor and physical skill development through human-animal interactions;

- Animal training;

- Practicing discipline;

- Incorporating an attitude of kindness and compassion;

- Learning about nurturance;

- Practicing loyalty and responsibility;

- Experiencing human-animal bonding;

- Learning responsible pet ownership; and

- Learning AAT and AAA training and activities (p. 4).

In school, our approaches to help reluctant readers often do the opposite of helping a child improve. According to Corbett (2009), much of the reading intervention employed in school serves as a constant reminder that reading is undesirable. Things like remedial exercises and work sheets attack the most vulnerable literacy learners. It is a reminder that the way the reader, his or her family, and his or her friends use language is deficient (p. 105). R.E.A.D. ® has had great success improving reading while respecting other key relationships. Jalongo et al. (2004) report all of the students who participated in R.E.A.D. ® for 13 months improved their reading. Some improved by two grade levels while others improved as much as four grade levels (p. 10). These improvements happened in fun, safe, friendly environments where children felt really good about themselves. Along with improved reading, many children found writing to their canine friend to be a big motivator and they ended up doing more writing. Lo Bianco and Freebody (1997) state that composing meaningful texts is an important literacy practice (p. 5). Within dog-assisted reading programs, writing became an important component. LaRose (2009) writes that children participating in The Professor Dog program did plenty of writing after reading to their caring canine. Rather than write to imaginary pen pals, children instead write to Dr. Suede (their reading buddy). This follow-up to reading not only strengthens their writing skills, but comprehension too. In such situations, the writing is often about the book they had read and included an explanation of what had taken place, favourite characters, and more (p. 1).

Several benefits of reading with dogs are reported by Intermountain Therapy Animals (2009a). Their benefits include:

Children have lower blood pressure and increased relaxation;

Children proceed at a self-determined pace;

Children are less intimidated than with their peers;

Children are not judged or ridiculed;

Children experience an attentive listener;

Great strides are made in reading and communication;

Self-esteem is increased;

Confidence is improved;

Children develop social skills;

Performance improves in other subjects; and

Attendance improves (Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2009a).

With our world being destroyed by our actions, we need to think differently about what is important and reflect that importance in our schools. According to Pattnaik (2004), it is imperative that children understand the contributions of animals to the ecosystem. We need to lead children to make a commitment to preserve the world's environment, including animals. When only academics are emphasized, schools have reneged on their responsibility to prepare socially and environmentally responsible individuals (p.97). Encouraging bonds with dogs at an early age will help children develop stronger attachments to our earth and all its inhabitants.

#### Conclusion

It is impossible to dispute the importance of learning to read. Without reading skills, most of today's curriculum is unattainable. Beyond that, many people feel a sense of relaxation

and pleasure from reading. We need to take seriously the deficits in our current reading intervention strategies. The benefits of dog-assisted reading programs go far beyond learning to read. The potential positive side effects should not be ignored. In our classrooms, we need more love, acceptance, and hope. There is potential for dogs to fill a huge void. We need more space for laughter and smiles. The next chapter will examine several existing programs and how they can help us create happy, hopeful schools.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Review of Existing Programs**

#### Introduction

The previous chapter examined the numerous benefits of dog-assisted reading. Based on these benefits, there are several dog-assisted reading programs currently used throughout North America. This chapter will review many of these programs that connect to the previously reviewed literature and that would enhance readers' lives not only with respect to their reading development but, as established in the previous chapter, also their development of empathy, ecological concern and connection, and social skills. While there are a variety of dog-assisted reading programs currently used in schools and libraries around the world, as yet there is none for children in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Although similar in many ways, each program reviewed here is unique. This chapter will explore in detail seven programs, focusing on: geographic origin, governing agency, criteria for volunteers, program benefits, and program limitations. A discussion of the benefits, in particular, will highlight the importance of a dog-assisted reading program for students in Newfoundland and Labrador. A comparison of several programs will help to shape better what might constitute a program for children in Newfoundland and Labrador, the focus of Chapter Five. In addition to these seven programs, in the appendix, there are brief summaries of five other programs. While there is not yet enough information on these five programs to warrant a full review here in this chapter, including

them in the appendix indicates the variety and abundance of programs currently in use and indicates the need for further research to validate the effectiveness of each program. Together the numbers also speak to the fact that many organizations are taking the great idea of children reading to dogs and developing programs specific to their needs.

Most of the programs reviewed in this chapter are exclusively reading programs, but one, in particular, *Green Chimneys*, encompasses and embraces learning in a much broader sense. It will be the first program to be reviewed. While it is not a reading program specifically, its philosophy, success, and programming can be a vision for the possibilities that exist with dog-assisted reading programs. It serves as a strong introduction and argument for the power of the connection between humans, nature, and animals. The next four programs are currently offered in Canada. The final two programs to be thoroughly reviewed, while not currently offered in Canada, are valuable to review. Since there is limited research available to validate empirically the power of reading with a dog, the final two programs are included because they include such research. The first, *Sit Stay Read!*, has been studied extensively through the dissertation by Corinne Smith. This dissertation provides important information on the benefits of dog-assisted reading and some statistical analysis of reading improvement. Finally, the *SHARE a Book* program has also been analysed to assess the difference in children's reading levels before and after the program.

### Green Chimneys

*Green Chimneys* is a program operated in the town of Patterson, Putnam County, NY. The founder of *Green Chimneys* is Samuel B. Ross, Jr., PhD. The program is not limited to dogs and reading only, but includes a more comprehensive approach to learning incorporating a variety of animals, plants, and nature. It sets the tone for a discussion of why dogs and reading can work so well together.

Green Chimneys is the nationally renowned, non-profit organization with a mission of restoring possibilities and creating futures for children with emotional, behavioral, social and learning challenges through educational, therapeutic and outreach services, while providing care for animals and nature, thereby promoting a philosophy of dignity and worth for all living things. (Green Chimneys, 2010)

*Green Chimneys* is considered a worldwide leader in animal-assisted therapy and activities. Mallon, Ross, Klee, and Ross (2006) write that the main campus of *Green Chimneys* Children's Services is a temporary home for the 102 children and adolescents and 80 day students who live there with barnyard animals, domestic companion animals, and wildlife (p. 151). For over fifty years, human-animal interactions have been actively healing people in care at *Green Chimneys*. The Ross Family purchased the farm in 1947 and, initially, the therapeutic benefit of the animals was not fully recognized. Over time, this benefit was undeniable and the programs evolved and re-shaped into something big! According to Mallon et al. (2006), the school developed in the early 1970s into a

residential treatment center that specialized in the care of children with emotional and behavioural needs. Children came with devastating backgrounds of abuse, homelessness, family substance abuse, and behavioural and educational difficulties (p. 151). *Green Chimneys* reaches children who are currently lost in traditional, public school settings. Mallon et al. (2006) explain that although the organization has changed and evolved over the years, the human-animal interactions have remained a focal point. The employees know the importance for the children, mainly from urban environments, to interact with animals (p. 151).

Ross (2011) details his experience building *Green Chimneys* and writes that, early in its inception, outdoor education quickly became a way to change subjects children thought were boring or hard into interesting and unforgettable lessons. Children became observant, spontaneous, and more aware of the need to conserve and to protect nature. The more children learned about nature, the more connected they felt to it and the more inclined they were to protect it (p. 174). As stated in Chapter Two, the importance of bonding with the environment first in order to feel compelled to protect it is instrumental. If we are to expect our children to clean up the environmental mess we have made, we need to ensure they feel a connection to Earth (Davis et al., 2008; Gruenewald, 2003a; Gruenewald, 2003b; Melson, 2001; Norman, 2006; Pattnaik, 2004; Ross, 2011). This objective is realized within the campus of *Green Chimneys*.

Ross (2011) also writes about the importance of love and attention as key ingredients when working with children. Through these foci, children's spirits are boosted and they blossom when they feel valued. Through accomplishments in one area, other

areas then improve. It became another of Ross' goals to see that each child continually had small accomplishments. A mantra persistently played in Ross' head of, "Who will help these children if we don't?" (p. 28). This thought strongly informs the need for dog-assisted reading for children in our province. Currently there are many children not being helped and we owe it to them to create flexible, loving, supportive programs that will meet their needs.

Ross (2011) writes about the non-discriminatory nature of animal companionship mentioned earlier in this thesis. He notes that animals see no difference between children who have been considered failures or those who have always received praise. Animals bring out the best in humans. Because animals require constant care, we must cooperate and respond to their needs. Through the various projects at *Green Chimneys* children who were once receivers of service become service providers. Self-esteem rises as does a sense of responsibility. The many residents of *Green Chimneys* who have experienced violence see an alternative when the human-animal bond is encouraged. As a result, relationships improve and the child who is helped at *Green Chimneys* then has a positive impact on his or her future relationships. The residential treatment helps free children to new possibilities who had previously been unduly limited because of severe learning disabilities or trauma. One of the many goals of the program is to help children develop a mastery of self in any environment where they can control their emotions, make choices, and develop basic life skills (pp. 216-218).

A program as beautiful as *Green Chimneys* is not without its challenges. Mallon et al. (2006) describe several issues. A huge operation like *Green Chimneys* has a large staff

and, as such, communication and collaboration is vital. Having consistent staff with the necessary knowledge, experience, and enthusiasm is critical. Finding the right balance between professionals, trained personnel, and volunteers can be a challenge (p. 153). Staff issues are a challenge as are client issues. Mallon et al. (2006) write that screening is completed when new clients arrive to find out about allergies, or a fear or dislike of particular animals. The physical well-being of clients is an ongoing concern so cleanliness and infection control are paramount (p. 154). Animal selection is another consideration and challenge. Mallon et al. (2006) explain that the animals must be carefully selected. Factors to consider include zoning, health regulations, and geography. Due to their size and location, *Green Chimneys* is well-suited to having animals in residence, while other programs may need to consider animal visits only. *Green Chimneys* has an administrative policy ensuring that all animals are healthy and adequately vaccinated (pp. 154-155). There are financial costs to consider too and fund raising initiatives are ongoing and constant. Being a non-profit organization makes payroll budgeting a challenge too. While flexibility is important, so are structure, consistency, and limits. Their recommendation for people looking to start a program is to start small so that the costs are manageable. The cost for food, shelter, veterinarians, grooming, and salaries will be overwhelming without adequate funds. Liability is yet another concern that can be addressed through safety plans and insurance (Mallon et al., 2006, pp. 155-156). With an open mind, proper preparation, and passionate coordinators, obstacles can be overcome.

The work *Green Chimneys* has done and continues to do is inspirational. The bond between humans, nature, and animals has been instrumental for many of the students who have overcome terrible adversity. The tireless efforts of Dr. Ross and his staff serve as an example to all educators as to the possibility and promise that lies within every student. Seeking alternative means of teaching, learning, and assessment must be ever-present in order to meet the needs of every child in our care. The tremendous success of *Green Chimneys* supports the potential that lies within dog-assisted reading programs and the importance of establishing such programs within our province.

The next five programs are specifically dog-assisted reading programs. Within each program, the main objective remains the same. Placing children within the presence of a non-judgmental, accepting dog eases their stress and fear related to reading. In turn, children want to read more and by reading more, their reading improves. Second, as stated in Chapter Two, reading aloud is an important component of skill development. Reading aloud to a dog is the foundation of each of the following five programs. Third, frequent interruptions halt reading progress and ruin the fluency with which someone reads. In each of these programs, the dog is the main listener and while the handler may intervene when absolutely necessary, it is not generally encouraged so that the reading experience is smooth. Fourth, all of these programs provide an emotional connection that shapes teaching and learning. The connection between the dogs and children is emotional as is the relationship between the handler and child. The connection between the handler and dog is another emotional connection the reader gets to see as a positive aspect of living and learning.

There are many more qualities shared within these programs. An important factor in literacy development is time spent with familiar others. All of these programs happen on a consistent basis, generally the same day and time of the week with the same dog and handler. This consistency then increases motivation and positive emotions and makes learning more enjoyable and reading something the children want to re-visit. By working with a dog, children are moved by the experiences of others and empathy develops. The nature of all these programs is collaborative and interactive which, as discussed in Chapter Two is a key part of learning. Within each program review there is also much evidence that the program is fun, thus emphasizing another key element in learning.

Unlike current reading interventions in schools where students must qualify for support, each of these programs is open to anyone with the desire to read to a dog. Readers do not need to be inherently lacking to reap the rewards of reading to a dog. To make it even more inclusive, there is no cost to children to participate in any of these programs.

The order of programs reviewed will begin with the programs geographically closest to Newfoundland and Labrador and most abundant in Canada and then farther afield. The benefits of programs closer to home are many. One benefit is easier access to support. However, even those programs farther afield have much to offer and their virtual presence and support is very strong. Developing a program for Newfoundland and Labrador may mean taking the very best of each of these programs as key ingredients in establishing an effective homegrown program.

### Paws to Read

*Paws to Read* is a dog-assisted reading program offered through Therapeutic Paws of Canada. Judy Sauv  is the founder of Therapeutic Paws of Canada (TPOC). As director of team leaders she oversees fifty team leaders throughout the country. The program has an influential reach in Canada. There are teams in British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island. There are about five hundred volunteers across the country, but many more are needed as waiting lists for people wanting services are long.

Close to home, the *Paws to Read* program takes place in sites across Nova Scotia. Collins (2008) reports that there are about 20 therapeutic dogs involved in the *Paws to Read* program offered at libraries in North Sydney, Sydney and Glace Bay. She says that the children indicate that the dogs are good listeners, do not interrupt and do not care if they make a mistake (p. 1). In addition to these Cape Breton-based programs, there is a program in the Greater Halifax Municipality as well.

In the *Paws to Read* program, Child Certified Therapy Dogs and handlers visit schools and libraries to help students with reading. The children choose the books they want to read to the dogs. As explored in Chapter Two, book self-selection is a critical part of maintaining interest in reading. According to the International Reading Association (2000), "Children who have access to varied sources of print materials in their classrooms, school libraries, town libraries and at home, and who are allowed to choose what they read, read more for pleasure and information" (p. 6). Children usually choose stories they think the dog will like. Some examples of high interest books for children to

read to dogs can be found in the appendix. Sometimes the dog's handler will help a child if he or she is struggling with a word, but the handler's presence is generally inconspicuous. Angus (2008) writes that the dog handler can offer help if a child is frustrated, but that the interaction is primarily between the child and dog (p. 26). The dog listens attentively. Rather than feeling intimidated or afraid of reading aloud the program is especially beneficial for shy or weak readers, but, it is also good for any child who wants to read to a canine friend.

While there is no cost to participants, schools, or libraries, there are fees associated with the necessary evaluations, including the uniform (golf shirt for the handler and vest for the dog) that is approximately \$100. Handlers also must complete a vulnerable persons police records check. There is also an exam for team leaders and evaluators and a resume outlining experience with dogs must also be submitted. Evaluations take place in a large room where walkers, wheelchairs, crutches, and canes are required to ensure no adverse reactions from the dogs. Dogs and handlers that participate in the *Paws to Read* program have proven their capabilities by successfully completing the TPOC Therapy Dog Evaluation, demonstrating their commitment by visiting for at least a year and also completing the Interaction With Children Evaluation (Therapeutic Paws of Canada, n.d.). The criteria for this evaluation are inaccessible to the general public as much of their information is restricted to members only and as such is password protected. TPOC insists that dogs are well groomed before their visits to schools and libraries and are up to date on health requirements. All dog and handler teams are covered by liability insurance (Therapeutic Paws of Canada, n.d.).

Through correspondence with Judy Sauvé, it became clear that unfortunately, a requirement to being involved with *Paws to Read* is having a dog (J. Sauve, personal communication, April 10, 2009). This eliminates some key volunteers who are eager to be involved and would make excellent leaders. This may be the case with other programs although it is not stated directly anywhere within the program information. This strict criterion is limiting and exclusionary. Anyone who is passionate, informed, and interested should be considered, especially when another limitation is the limited number of dogs and handlers available. Opening the door to more volunteers would expand the program. A common thread among all these programs is not enough dogs available to service the need. This leaves an almost impossible task of prioritizing who gets to read with the dog and who gets left out.

One of the attractions of *Paws to Read* is the proximity of support available. Being a Canadian agency with team leaders as close as Nova Scotia makes it appealing, with support an email, call, or short flight away. This is especially helpful for training support for startup. A fledgling program has to bear the costs of trainers and program overseers in the startup period. Since Newfoundland and Labrador has not had a dog-assisted reading program, ongoing support would be imperative. It is also very positive that the program is accessible to all children and not only those who are struggling. Sometimes the signs of a struggling, unhappy, or frustrated learner are not obvious so having it accessible to all enables everyone.

### Reading Tails

Since 1883, St John Ambulance (SJA) has been of service in Canada providing therapy dogs in hospitals and nursing homes. Canadians who are confined to hospitals, nursing homes and special needs centres have the support of St. John Ambulance. Since 1996, through their therapy dog program, St. John Ambulance volunteers and their dogs bring joy and four-legged companionship to people through regular visits to hospitals, palliative care units, senior's residences, schools, and day-care centres. More recently, in 2003, they added dog-assisted reading to their repertoire. *Reading Tails* is a six-week program that has been designed for children between the ages of 6 and 11 years. The first pilot program began in Sudbury in April of 2007, with five teams and 10 children participating. The children experience twenty-minute reading sessions with the companionship of a certified St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog. A child's dread is replaced with eager anticipation when a therapy dog is listening. The environment changes and learning occurs. The children also make significant improvement in their reading and communication skills. Self-esteem, confidence and social skills also improve (St. John Ambulance, 2010).

Currently, the St. John's branch of St. John Ambulance is not offering *Reading Tails*. Their pre-emptive challenge is two-fold. Having enough dogs and handlers to meet the current needs of their existing programs is one obstacle. Funding is another challenge. The local branch of SJA has been unsuccessful in acquiring the necessary funding required to start up a reading program. While this program is not as large as *Paws to Read*, the fact that there are therapy dogs and handlers already volunteering in

Newfoundland and Labrador makes it very appealing. Currently St. John Ambulance therapy dogs and handlers visit nursing homes and hospitals. There is a St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog program in place at the Janeway Children's Health and Rehabilitation Centre that has been operating since August 2006. Rather than starting from nothing, operating a *Reading Tails* program has an established base with readily available and locally trained dogs and eager volunteers. The challenge would be to recruit and to train new dogs and handlers so that programs are not compromised and *Reading Tails* would have enough dedicated support to grow and flourish. Most dog therapy organizations will not allow dogs and handlers to volunteer for more than one organization. By tapping into an existing database of dogs and handlers, they would not risk a conflict of interest created by getting involved with another therapy organization. The long-standing history of St. John Ambulance also adds important credibility. There is a sense of security and safety associated with their name and logo. Such a large organization has ready access to volunteers, staff, and even administrative needs. These features are a huge potential asset in beginning a new program.

#### Tail Waggin' Tutors

Therapy Dogs International (TDI®) has been operating since 1976 out of New Jersey. Therapy Dogs International (TDI®) is a volunteer organization dedicated to regulating, testing and registering therapy dogs and their volunteer handlers to visit nursing homes, hospitals, other institutions and wherever else therapy dogs are needed. Purebred, mixed breed, and rescue dogs are all active participants. There are dogs and volunteer handlers in all fifty states as well in some unspecified Canadian sites.

Successful therapy dogs need an appropriate temperament to complete the required evaluations and they must be comfortable around a variety of service equipment. Like most therapy dog organizations, TDI® is a non-profit organization and as such relies on membership dues and donations (Therapy Dogs International, 2009a).

The program has a clear purpose. The main objective of the program is to provide a relaxed and 'dog-friendly' atmosphere. This allows students to practice the skill of reading. The motivation to read is drastically improved with the company of a dog. Self-esteem also rises. Associating reading with something pleasant makes it an experience that children want to re-visit. In addition to children showing reading improvement, they also show an enthusiasm and excitement to read. Some are so excited that they cannot wait to get home and practice more reading with their own family dog (Therapy Dogs International, 2009a)! This creates yet another benefit that is the sheer pleasure one feels when in the presence of a dog. Any children who may have had a fear of dogs receive safe, supported interactions with a dog which helps alleviate their fears. Although most of the focus is on the children, the handlers benefit too. The program gives people an opportunity to give back to the community. By helping children become better readers, the volunteers are helping them with their education which in turn can help them become more productive citizens (Therapy Dogs International, 2009a).

The Therapy Dogs International website includes a video, "Children Reading To Dogs - *Tail Waggin' Tutors*", where a principal recounts the beginning of the program at her school. It is a wonderful example of an open mind opening doors. Although the principal did not believe the research about dogs helping children improve in reading, she

loved dogs and thought the opportunity for the students to bond with a dog would be worthwhile. She was pleasantly surprised to also see that reading did improve. The video also explains how important collaboration is to the success of the program. The teachers, principal, and social worker collaborate to determine which children might really benefit from working with a therapy dog. The student is paired with the same handler on a weekly basis that provides important consistency and the opportunity to develop a strong relationship (Therapy Dogs International, 2009c).

While *Tail Waggin' Tutors* does not yet have a strong Canadian presence, the long history of Therapy Dogs International lends credibility to its program. Having several programs from which to choose keeps possibilities open in the event of roadblocks that might present when attempting to implement any singular program.

#### R.E.A.D.

Intermountain Therapy Animals offers a program called Reading Education Assistance Dogs® or R.E.A.D. ®. Intermountain Therapy Animals is a non-profit organization. In 1999, they launched R.E.A.D. ®, a comprehensive literacy program built around the pleasing idea of reading to dogs. Since then the program has been spreading quickly and joyfully (Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2009a). Although it began in Utah, the program is now offered throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. In Canada, there are several R.E.A.D. ® sites in British Columbia and Ontario. Cape Breton therapy dog volunteers also run the R.E.A.D. ® program. Additionally, there have been other reading programs developed with R.E.A.D. ® as their inspiration.

R.E.A.D. ® is an inexpensive, effective, and fun way to improve children's reading skills with the help of certified therapy animal teams as literacy mentors. R.E.A.D. ® makes very important assumptions about literacy and learners. Instead of assuming or focussing on all the things a reader cannot do or putting a child through a gruelling assessment, the program assumes reading difficulties might stem from fear and that having fun is a counter to fear and an important component of a reading program (Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2009a). Like other dog-assisted reading programs, R.E.A.D. ® uses animals who have been trained and tested for health, safety, appropriate skills and temperament. It makes a huge difference that it is fun to have such special animals hear children read (Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2009a). Along with the fun factor, the use of dogs helps eliminate children's fear of reading. When learning experiences are pleasurable, there is a stronger connection and deeper satisfaction with the process (Bueche, 2003; Comber, 1998b; Davis, et. al., 2008; Kaymen, 2005).

The Intermountain Therapy Animals website is extensive, including information, video clips, and photographs. There is a training manual available for order that includes information on the program, research to convince decision makers of the power of the program, start-up necessities, and more. There is also a DVD available to order which outlines the steps involved in becoming a R.E.A.D. ® team. The video can also be viewed on YouTube so one can get a sense of the steps without any upfront costs. The training video, "Becoming a R.E.A.D. ® Team", outlines several requirements to consider in order for the program to be successful. Most importantly, a handler must consider the suitability of his or her dog. In order for it to be fun and creative for the child, the handler

must believe the dog is enjoying reading. This point is critical since, as already stated; part of the success of reading to dogs is the attentiveness and interest in reading which is shown by the dog (Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2009b).

Another important requirement is that the dog must consistently be able to follow basic commands in both a controlled environment and one with many distractions. Even though the program is held in the same location each session, naturally, there would be many distractions. In a school, for example, there would be announcements, children moving throughout the building, potential fire drills, bells, and other distractions. In addition to basic obedience skills the dog must possess, there are also specific read obedience skills outlined. An example of a read obedience skill is the “Paw Stay” where the dog learns to keep his or her paw on the page for the child that adds authenticity to the whole process. It is as though the dog is holding the page and waiting for the next part of the story. About a month of home training should enable the handler and dog to become strong at performing these skills (Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2009c).

It is also critical for the handler to become well aware of children’s literature to be able to relate to the students. Again, there are several recommendations of good reads in the annotated bibliography in the appendix. As stated in Chapter Two, meaningful engagement with texts is vital in developing literacy skills and a love of reading. Comber (1998a) writes, “A key principle in using texts which may be familiar to children as part of everyday life is that they may be more powerfully positioned to usefully approach it” (p. 15). If the handler is disengaged the program could not be as successful. By becoming familiar with children’s literature, a handler can more easily tap into children’s prior

knowledge which is so important. Further, being aware of children's literature will assist the handler in offering a variety of texts that is central to reading development. School and library staffs also insist on the importance of the handler to be patient, prepared, confident, and loving. Handlers must have the emotional preparedness to work with potentially challenging children. Handlers must celebrate the effort the children show. Handlers must be able to adapt to a variety of children from shy to outgoing. This is significant because, as stated in Chapter Two, recognizing individual uniqueness is important to validating and respecting a student that ultimately will positively impact his or her learning and experience. Getting to know the child, his or her likes, dislikes, and interests is imperative since our identity and being deeply impacts the way we attend to reading and writing. The importance of the handler is rarely mentioned in the literature surrounding the other programs reviewed which makes R.E.A.D. ® stand out because the qualities the handler must possess are another important link to the success of the program.

The setting for the program is explored in the video, "Becoming a R.E.A.D. ® Team". The program can take place in a school where it is Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) while in a library it is considered Animal Assisted Activity (AAA). The difference, as outlined in the first chapter of this thesis, is that at the library there are no specific goals and the reader's progress is not documented a difference that qualifies it as activity rather than therapy. The school setting must be comfortable and the purpose is to help the child relax. The one-on-one time makes the reader feel important. It also allows a shy child who may not speak or read in a large group setting to open up and read aloud

with greater confidence. The biggest challenge in the school setting is that the handler is working without the direct support of a teacher and therefore must have the confidence to believe in what he or she is doing. After the session, there are opportunities to collaborate with school staff. The handler must be prepared to be able to act as a strong mentor. This collaboration and communication is vital. School staff will work with a small group of students while readers individually go with the dog and handler for about twenty minutes. Similar to other dog-assisted reading programs, the dog must be groomed before visits and treated with an anti-dander application. Both the handler and the dog must wear their uniform that varies from site to site, but usually consists of a t-shirt for the handler and bandana for the dog (Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2009c).

The video, "Becoming a R.E.A.D. Team" outlines other considerations. Book selection is important too. School staff will often give the handler recommendations that they feel will be challenging for the reader, but not overwhelming. Books about animals are often high interest books that are well received. It is extremely helpful, as the handler has to encourage interaction between the dog and the reader. It is important for the handler to follow along in the book as the child reads to see how well they are recognizing words. Handlers must also be prepared to explain the actions of the dog. Sometimes a dog will roll right over and close his or her eyes and this behaviour can often be met with disdain from the reader that the dog is no longer listening. A creative answer is that the book is so interesting that it is easier for the dog to focus if they close their eyes and try to picture what is happening. It is very soothing when the dog is near enough for the child to rub the animal while reading. The handler must be aware of the

dog's needs at all times. If the dog is restless, it might need a walk or a bathroom break. Respecting the needs of the dog is paramount (Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2009d).

Another common challenge is the arrival of an outside party, perhaps the reader's sibling, who gets very excited and eager to learn details about the dog. This distraction can break the moment. It is important to keep the child's time with the dog sacred. Managing the space can help avoid these distractions. The best strategy is to try to avoid this interruption, but that is not always possible. If the handler is alert and sees someone approaching ahead of time, he or she can often simply hand signal that they will be free in a minute, but to please wait until they are finished. Posted signs can also help prevent distractions. Another challenge can be when a child does not want to stop reading at the end of a session. This situation can be made positive by reiterating just how interested the dog is and using a bookmark to note where they have stopped and that he or she will be looking forward to returning. With reluctant readers, not wanting to stop reading is a wonderful challenge! When the session is over, it is important to have the child communicate about what he or she has read. Often the dog will "pawtograph" the book they have read together. Most handlers give this child a treat for the dog that increases their bond and gives the dog something to look forward to for his or her effort. Children should be shown how to properly give a dog a treat with their hand open and flat (Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2009a).

The Intermountain Therapy Animals website (2009f) has reactions from educators, parents, librarians, children's book authors, handlers, and most importantly, children. Jesse, age seven a student in Gatineau, Quebec, has said:

Last year in grade 1, I didn't know how to read. It didn't make me feel very good about myself. After I started to read to Chelsea I felt good. I like to read to her because she helps me with words and she's a good listener. Now I can read a lot of different books. That makes me very happy. My favourite thing I like about Chelsea is that she does cool tricks and barks to say 'bye' to me (Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2009f).

Although the geographic proximity is not ideal and with the majority of its focus being American, the information available online is far more extensive than any of the other programs reviewed. Further, the information and requirements for the handler are rarely mentioned in any of the other programs and yet this is such a key piece to the success of dog-assisted reading programs.

#### Sit Stay Read

The *Sit Stay Read!* program has been featured on NBC news and has been studied extensively through the dissertation of Dr. Corinne Smith. The program is summarized as follows:

Through a curriculum designed with the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) Center for Literacy, Sit Stay Read's trained volunteers and certified dog teams improve reading fluency, make reading fun, and inspire children to become lifelong readers. Reading to a dog increases confidence and generates excitement about reading. Combined with dog-themed books and writing assignments, the dogs bring the sessions to life and provide a text-to-world connection—read about a dog; see a dog; touch a dog. Programs are provided

free of charge to public schools and community facilities serving low-income families. Currently all programs are in the city of Chicago. We are looking to expand outside the area as resources become available (*Sit Stay Read!*, n.d.).

The program has grown slowly, partly because of limited funding, but more so to ensure the quality of the program. Smith (2009) explains that the fact that administrators of *Sit Stay Read!* are not quick to sell the program shows that they are very interested in maintaining the integrity of the program (p. 6).

As outlined in Smith's (2009) dissertation, the program has been very successful. Smith studied the program using quantitative and qualitative data. Students, teachers, administrators, and volunteers were interviewed. Smith (2009) reports that one hundred and fifty-two second grade students participated in the *Sit Stay Read!* program during the 2008/2009 school year. They were selected for the quantitative dimension of the study while 98 students in a comparison group who did not participate in the program were also studied (p. 42). Although Smith recognized the importance of test scores as one way of validating the program, she also knew the importance of the participants' voices. Smith (2009) writes that the effectiveness of the program cannot be reduced to simply pretest and posttest measures of reading oral fluency. Such scores are one aspect to consider for measuring student improvement in relation to a structured reading intervention program. This alone, however, does not evaluate the overall effectiveness of the program. It also fails to realize the underlying reasons why the program is successful in engaging students and staff in the reading process (p. 8).

Often it is very difficult to motivate students to learn, especially when learning is something that continues to be frustrating and challenging. One important discovery made by Smith was the increased motivation children had while in the *Sit Stay Read!* program. Smith (2009) cites that students, teachers, and program coordinators talk about how motivating this program is for students. Within the program students are engaged with their learning. She reflects on how calm are classrooms on the day of the dog visits (p. 8). Student absenteeism was lower on days of the program.

Smith (2009) describes the program. Each session is an hour long. During the session children participate in reading and writing activities. They are individually pulled from regular class activities to read aloud to a dog and his or her handler. The dog handlers have completed specialized *Sit Stay Read!* training (p. 46). Teachers and students had plenty of great things to say about the program. Smith (2009) shares several favourable comments, "...it was fun, organized, and that having the dogs in the classroom was exciting. Additionally, the program was described as well constructed, with strong scaffolding built into it so that lessons were presented like guided reading lessons" (p. 60). Teachers noticed things about their students that went beyond reading. Smith (2009) explains that teachers also stress the non-literacy benefits of the program. There is a spirit of cooperation that the program inspires in children. There is a noticeable improvement in listening and attending skills, being able to take turns, and general behavioural compliance (p. 77). Student comments were equally favourable. Smith (2009) reports that all students indicate that they believe *Sit Stay Read!* makes them better readers and

writers. The students indicate that they read more and are better readers than before the program (p. 68).

There may still be skeptics about *Sit Stay Read!* but the statistical information should persuade the non-believers of the validity of this program. Smith (2009) reports that the data shows statistically significant higher gains in oral reading fluency for children involved in *Sit Stay Read!* than those not participating. The mean score for students' oral reading fluency involved in the program before beginning was 38.69. After the program the mean score increased to 81.90. On the other hand, students in the comparison group had a beginning oral reading fluency mean score of 27.62. At the end of the time the mean score for oral reading fluency increased to 62.73. The gain for the *Sit Stay Read!* group was 43.21 words per minute, but only a gain of 35.11 for the group not exposed to the program. This is a significant difference of 8.1 words per minute (p. 72).

Despite the limitation of the absence of a *Sit Stay Read!* program in Canada, its program is worthy of review for the careful structure, clear educational objectives and empirical analysis to support it. With a dearth of statistical analysis yet available, Smith's work lends even more credibility to dog-assisted reading programs. It also highlights the importance of further research studying other programs to test claims and to explore reasons for their success.

## **Chapter Five**

### **A School Based Dog-Assisted Reading Program**

#### Introduction

Following a review of several programs in Chapter Four, the advantages and limitations of each program are more apparent. While it is very tempting to consider developing a customized program catered specifically to students and educators of Newfoundland and Labrador, as a first step such a program seems very impractical. Operating within an existing program provides liability coverage under the governing agencies, which is critical. Establishing a unique program for our province is not an idea to forget, but something to keep in the background as a future possibility as the program expands and future research indicates its strengths and challenges. At this time, a pilot program is only the beginning, an initial step that will require follow up research to test its effectiveness. At that time, it may be necessary to revisit which program, current or newly developed, will best meet every stakeholder's needs.

This chapter will consider the most appropriate program to adopt at this time as well as conditions within a school that would make it a good site for a pilot program. Then, consideration will be given to a grade level that would be the most effective place to offer the program by examining curriculum outcomes and connections that would be a good match between them and the possibilities within a dog-assisted reading program. In addition to Language Arts curriculum outcomes, this chapter will also explore other curriculum outcomes that can potentially be met, and, the benefits beyond the curriculum

that can be expected from dog-assisted reading. Finally, a dog-assisted reading program will be proposed with a sample curricular unit to integrate these ideas for consideration by teachers and administrators interested in how dogs and reading can come together in their schools.

### Program

Without exception, each program reviewed boasts improvements in reading among the children who participate. Most children who participate in dog-assisted reading make gigantic strides in their reading. Reading scores improve after students join dog-assisted reading programs and some research indicates improvement by as much as four grade levels (Bernstein-Wax, 2010; Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2009e; Jalongo et al., 2004; Newlin, 2003; Paradise, 2007; Smith, 2009; Therapeutic Paws of Canada, n.d.). Ultimately, such progress is seriously needed anywhere, including in this province. For this reason, any of the reviewed programs would be suitable. It is necessary then to look at other aspects of each program that would then make it valuable to propose for use in this province. There are strengths and challenges with each of the reviewed programs. Three programs were easy to rule out at this time. The *Sit Stay Read* and *SHARE a Book* programs, while very important to review given the greater depth of research completed around each program, are not currently good choices for Newfoundland and Labrador. Given that there are no established sites at all within Canada makes it unattractive for reasons previously discussed. In addition, there are very few resources available. This same challenge exists with the Therapy Dogs International program, *Tail Waggin' Tutors*. Having so few resources and limited availability in Canada make them choices worth

reconsidering at a later time if a change in program is needed and reliance on such resources is not critical.

On the other hand, there are three standout programs worth considering for implementation in Newfoundland and Labrador. In order, R. E. A. D. ®, *Reading Tails*, and *Paws to Read* are the suggested programs to consider for pilot at the present time. There are a variety of reasons for these programs to be considered initially.

R. E. A. D. ® should be the first program considered for Newfoundland and Labrador for an abundance of reasons. Their sites in Canada make easier access to trouble-shoot when necessary. There are a plethora of resources available to help implement and maintain the program, and the philosophy of the program matches what is needed here at home.

In existence since 1999, this comprehensive literacy program helps readers enjoy the act of opening a book and all that follows it. With sites as close as Cape Breton, asking a question, or solving a problem is much easier. R. E. A. D. ® has inspired other program developments, which adds credibility to their program and also gives hope to the idea of a future custom made program for Newfoundland and Labrador (Bueche, 2003; Paradise, 2009).

Fun is a necessary ingredient in this program that has been lacking in many traditional reading programs here and elsewhere. A key motivating factor to read is enjoyment. Reaching full literacy potential is incredibly unlikely when students are not enjoying the experience of reading. One of the best ways to ensure that children discover the joy of books is to provide exciting, memorable reading experiences. Higher levels of

engagement and effort in reading are inspired by fun and children are empowered when they can forget about their limitations in an enjoyable environment (Arnold & Colburn, 2004; Bueche, 2003; Comber, 1998b; Cullen & Shaldon, 2003; Gambrell, 2011; Harrington, n.d.; Mathers, 2008). By stripping away the stigma of reading difficulties and reducing the fear so many children have had around reading, this enjoyable program is a much needed boost for students and teachers alike.

No program reviewed in this thesis has as many resources as R. E. A. D. ®. To start something so innovative, the more resources available the better equipped everyone will be to administer the program and trouble-shoot as needed. From the website to the training manual and videos, success will be easier to reach with this support. The emphasis placed on the handler's role in the R. E. A. D. ® program also makes it very attractive.

The philosophy of R. E. A. D. ® is wonderful. The point is to make the child relax and feel important and to develop confidence. The child's time with the dog is revered, thereby helping the child to believe he or she is wanted and significant. The relationship is crucial. To learn and to develop well requires meaningful, secure, and continuous relationships (Cullen & Shaldon, 2003; Hargreaves, 2000). Cole (2003) suggests it is essential for students to engage in social interactions in order to develop an intrinsic motivation to read (p. 335).

The second program to consider is the St. John Ambulance *Reading Tails*. This program is a great choice for many reasons one of which is the long-standing tradition the St. John Ambulance has for helping people. It is widely known and has a large volunteer

base. Since 1883, St. John Ambulance has been helping people. Since 1996, their therapy dog program has been assisting children and adults to live fuller lives. The fact that therapy dogs currently work with children at the Janeway Children's Hospital in St. John's lends a tremendous amount of credibility to a reading program associated with it. Since there are already dogs and handlers certified as therapy dogs in the province, the next step to prepare for *Reading Tails* would be less of a leap than starting from scratch.

The two challenges that could potentially interfere with implementation would be funding and supply of enough dogs and handlers. Roberta Hewitt, Associate to Finance & Community Services for St. John Ambulance, reports that SJA wanted to start a reading program, but they did not receive the funding for which they applied (personal communication, March 31, 2009). If these two challenges are too great to overcome, the final program for immediate consideration is the Therapeutic Paws of Canada program, *Paws to Read*.

*Paws to Read* has an extensive reach within Canada. With sites as close as Cape Breton, as with the R. E. A. D. ® program, it is appealing to know support is nearby. There are fifty team leaders throughout the country and about five hundred volunteers across the country. However, the need for volunteers is ever-present as meeting the demand for dogs and programs is a constant challenge for any program. The program takes place in both schools and libraries and it is important to know that it can be facilitated in both venues. The fact that there is no cost for schools to participate is a huge obstacle overcome. Handlers would need to be prepared to pay associated fees, but in terms of schools implementing the program, cost would not be a barrier.

The evaluation process is extensive and lends a tremendous amount of credibility to the program thereby ensuring the safety of dogs and humans. To reduce the impact dogs could potentially have on persons with allergies, dogs are well groomed before each visit.

While any of the afore-mentioned programs would be a fine starting place, the suggested order is important so as to begin with the best match. Many of the challenges are the same from program to program. R. E. A. D. ® stands alone in terms of the resources available. It cannot be emphasized enough that in order for a new program to be successful, resources are necessary because education – professional development, if you will – is the key to success in this as in many other innovations in teaching and learning. In order for a pilot program to have a chance to be successful, there are several conditions required to consider before implementation.

#### Conditions

There are numerous conditions that should be met before considering the implementation of a pilot program of children reading with dogs. In order for schools, children, caregivers, teachers, and the larger school community to embrace this innovative idea, careful screening must be done before implementation. From the physical capacity of the school to the people inside it, there are many conditions that would enhance the overall experience and others that would shut it down completely.

Responsive, willing teachers and administrators are a must! Unfortunately, new programs are often introduced with little professional development or ‘in-service’ or warning and are expected to be done by everyone. This program (any program) can only

be successful with the right introduction to enthusiastic facilitators. Piloting the program initially in a few schools will keep the demands manageable and allow for an assessment of interested educators. Those who are not interested would not be suitable candidates for the program, and since a common challenge is not having enough dogs and handlers, keeping it small initially will help alleviate this challenge. Dog-assisted reading is not for every student, school, or educator. Starting out too big without careful consideration of the emotions of the school community will only end in frustration and failure.

Finding willing and excited educators is an imperative criterion. This importance was showcased in the previous chapter in relation to the *Tail Waggin' Tutors* program. Although the principal was initially reticent about the reading benefit she was open-minded enough to see that the program had value beyond improving reading scores. This open, loving attitude made way for an enriching program that did all she hoped and helped her students with reading too! Educators would need to be willing to collaborate with the handlers. This collaboration would further enhance the emotional aspect of teaching. Respecting the emotional space in classrooms would be greatly enhanced as teachers, administrators, handlers, students, and the greater school community work together to see that emotions are beyond individuals, but are embedded and expressed in human relationships (Cullen & Shaldon, 2003; Hargreaves, 2000; Zorn & Boler, 2007). In a profession already fraught with time demands where countless teachers feel pulled in many directions with no time to spare, success within a dog-assisted reading program could only happen with a positive, willing attitude. This type of attitude is a non-negotiable condition. Being open-minded is essential (Jalongo et al., 2004).

The physical conditions of the school are important to consider. As previously mentioned, dogs are groomed before visits, but there still may be concern with respect to allergies and other health-related issues. A school with a room that could be specified for dog therapy would be ideal. But, if such a space is not available, a room is needed that has limited access. For example, a music room or gymnasium would not be good choices since they are areas all staff and students frequent. With limited use – rooms like a special education room or a guidance office that is not widely used - students with severe allergies could more easily avoid this space. Some schools may even have space in a section of the library, a space that would provide appropriate ambience for the program. Using the same room each time would create another element of consistency and would be more familiar for the dogs, handlers, and students. Clean up of fur could be limited to one specified area making it more manageable for custodial staff. The room or area would need to be one with the least likelihood of distractions and be able to be closed off and secured. Consideration should be first given, based on need, to schools where children are struggling with reading. The Eastern School District has deployed its numeracy support teachers to schools where provincial assessments indicate a school is performing below the provincial standard. A similar method could be used to narrow down the number of schools to pilot the program. An example of an ideal school at which to begin is Upper Gullies Elementary where I currently teach. Academically, many of our students generally struggle, but our teaching staff is open and excited about new programs and expanding teaching practices. The school administration is incredibly supportive and open to new ideas and dogs already frequent the building! Socially and economically

disadvantaged schools would be important to target as many of these children may not have the means to avail of support programs in other ways and areas. Again, Upper Gullies Elementary has a large population of students with limited financial means. Our breakfast and lunch programs are well utilized by most students. The program should take place during school hours so transportation is a non-issue for students. It would be unfortunate to schedule this program in after-school hours, thereby eliminating many children who may not be able to get a drive home after the program ends. To narrow further the scope of the program, it would also be wise to start within one grade only and branch out later as more dogs and handlers are recruited, interest is built, logistics are routinized, and a larger group can be managed.

#### Grade Level: Where to begin?

As mentioned earlier, one of the issues that surely will be a concern is supply and demand. For that reason, a pilot program could be implemented in only a very limited number of schools. Limiting the number of classrooms within a school would also help ease this anticipated problem.

It has been my experience that primary students are generally very motivated and eager to try. There are many early intervention literacy strategies currently at work within the primary classroom. At the elementary level, a decline in motivation becomes more obvious as does a greater challenge with reading. According to Baker, Terry, & Bridger (1997), "Students' sense of alienation, disenfranchisement, lack of care, and lack of belonging to school increase with age" (p. 587). As children move through the elementary grades there is a negative trend in attitude toward reading and a decline in interest in

reading (Baker et al., 1997; Mathers, 2008; McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 2001). Therefore a pilot dog-assisted reading program should be implemented in the elementary grades. Often when elementary students are “pulled out” for extra support, they are more vulnerable to negative self-esteem issues and teasing from peers. If the “pull out” program is as exciting as reading to dogs, and children want to go, this feature makes it much more positive. More specifically, focussing on a particular grade at the elementary level is beneficial for three main reasons. As previously stated, the more narrow the focus, the more likelihood to meet the demand with enough dogs and handlers. In addition, specific curriculum connections can be explored. Researching the effectiveness of the program would be easier to measure within one grade level rather than a large range of ages and grade levels.

Being a Grade Six teacher, my first instinct was to consider Grade Six an appropriate place for a pilot program. While every grade has several things happening, in a K-6 school, Grade Six seems to have many extras in addition to the usual busy times in any classroom. The Royal Newfoundland Constabulary or Royal Canadian Mounted Police completes the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program over ten weeks. Provincial assessments demand a lot of additional class time too. There are inevitably school leaving field trips, assemblies, and Junior High orientations. In addition, Grade Six might arguably be too late to turn on an already turned off reader. Implementing a dog-assisted reading program a little earlier might serve a greater purpose. If the pilot program is implemented at Grade Five, there is potential when it expands to easily modify it for Grade Four and/or Grade Six. Modifying the program to meet Grade Four needs and

outcomes would be especially beneficial because there is research to indicate there is often a “reading slump” at Grade Four where reading progress decelerates. Hirsch (2003) writes, “We’re finding that even though the vast majority of our youngest readers can manage simple texts, many students – particularly those from low-income families – struggle when it comes time in grade four to tackle more advanced academic texts” (p. 10). This struggle, or “slump” impedes progress and can cause cumulating deficits in academic literacy that has a negative impact across the curriculum (Chall & Jacobs, 2003; Hirsch, 2003; Suhr et al., 2010).

#### Language Arts Curriculum Outcomes

There are several curriculum outcomes that would be met in the Grade Five Language Arts curriculum through dog-assisted reading. The Department of Education (1998) Language Arts curriculum guide expects students to meet several outcomes within reading. The following outcomes are facilitated well with dog-assisted reading:

- Students will contribute to and respond constructively in conversation, small-group, and whole-group discussion, recognizing their roles and responsibilities as speakers and listeners (p. 64);
- Students will use word choice, tone of voice, and facial expression appropriate to the speaking occasion (p. 64);
- Students will demonstrate an awareness of the needs, rights, and feelings of others by listening attentively and speaking in a manner appropriate to the situation (p. 66);

- Students will consider purpose and the needs and expectations of their audiences (p. 66);
- Students will select, independently, texts appropriate to their interests and learning needs (p. 68);
- Students will read widely and experience a variety of children's literature with an emphasis in genre and authors (p. 68);
- Students will describe, share, and discuss their personal reactions to a range of texts across genres, topics, and subjects (p. 72).

I will discuss each of these curricular outcomes in more detail and in relation to a dog-assisted reading program.

Outcome: Students will contribute to and respond constructively in conversation, small-group, and whole-group discussion, recognizing their roles and responsibilities as speakers and listeners.

This outcome will be met because to read with a dog and handler will require children to engage in conversations. Dogs often act as a catalyst to facilitate conversation so shy children especially would benefit from reading with a dog and may become more willing to engage in conversation both during the session with the dog and beyond. Often children who are withdrawn will communicate more willingly when a dog is present. Animals act as motivation to communication as social anxiety decreases. The presence of a therapy dog can be social lubricant drawing children to students with disabilities who might otherwise be ignored by their peers (Brous, 2010; Bueche, 2003; Chandler, 2001;

Faver & Bradley, 2009; Friesen, 2010; Jalongo et al., 2004; Melson, 2001; Watts & Stout Everly, 2009; Worboy, 2010).

Outcome: Students will use word choice, tone of voice, and facial expression appropriate to the speaking occasion.

This outcome is accomplished through reading aloud to a dog. Reading aloud will help children develop tone of voice and facial expressions. One of the most striking things I have witnessed in the available videos of children reading to dogs is their expression and tone of voice that matches so beautifully the occasion. Simply reading aloud in class situations can become routine and monotonous. Yet, a dog audience presents a fresh listener and one that readers often want to excite and to entertain. The children want the dog to enjoy the experience (Bernstein-Wax, 2010; Bueche, 2003; Harrington, n.d.; Kogan, 2008).

Outcome: Students will demonstrate an awareness of the needs, rights, and feelings of others by listening attentively and speaking in a manner appropriate to the situation.

This outcome will also be met because students working with dogs generally demonstrate sensitivity and respect. Being kind and gentle to another living being is how we learn sensitivity and respect. Interacting with animals allows children to practice respect and gentleness. Time with animals gives a space to learn that, along with meeting our own needs, it is important to recognize the needs of others. Because animals require nurturing, this program presents opportunities to be sensitive. Animals in classrooms have enhanced the humane attitudes of students and more empathy towards humans becomes likely (Chandler, 2001; Faver & Bradley, 2009; Mallon, 1994; Melson, 2001).

Outcome: Students will consider purpose and the needs and expectations of their audiences.

This outcome is met when reading with dogs because children consider their audience, the dog, and its interest level and most often choose books about dogs. This implies intimate knowledge of the audience and tremendous consideration of the needs and expectations from the canine friend. Part of the program requires children to choose books to read with their canine friend. Often children are very concerned with choosing a book their dog will enjoy (Angus, 2008; Collins, 2008; North Shore News, 2009; Therapeutic Paws of Canada, n.d.).

Outcome: Students will select, independently, texts appropriate to their interests and learning needs.

This outcome is met when students, instead of having books supplied to them, as is often the case in special education delivery, choose books independently. This program is a great way to learn how to choose a book that meets their needs. Having the opportunity to choose what to read is a big step toward empowering readers. When children are permitted to choose what to read, they read more for pleasure and for information. Students are also more likely to take responsibility for their own learning when they have been active in their own resource gathering (Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation, 2002; International Reading Association, 2000). In the annotated bibliography found in Appendix C, there are several suggested good reads. Many of the selected texts enhance the themes of dog-assisted reading and help deliver these outcomes. Several of the titles are likely already found in many school libraries. While it

is certainly not mandatory to have these selections to participate in dog-assisted reading, having a well-stocked library with a variety of books is important.

Outcome: Students will read widely and experience a variety of children's literature with an emphasis in genre and authors.

The outcome that students will read widely will be met. Reading widely has certainly been shown in other existing programs to be a by-product of reading to dogs. Not only are children more motivated to read within their time with the dog, but they often are looking for, and reading books much more frequently when not in the program too. There has been much research to support the claim that the more children enjoy reading the more they will read and the more they read, the better they read (Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation, 2002; International Reading Association, 2000; Kuhn et al., 2006; LoBianco & Freebody, 1997; Munro, 2003). Overall achievement in reading is greatly impacted by the amount of reading students complete. Extensive exposure to print enables word recognition. Reading aloud helps develop fluency and phrasing. When children engage in voluntary reading opportunities they are more positive about reading and their reading improves. Effective early literacy is in large part a result of reading and writing vast amounts across a wide range (Atlantic Canada Professional Development Resource, 2002; Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation, 2002; International Reading Association, 2000; Kuhn et al., 2006; LoBianco & Freebody, 1997; Munro, 2003).

Outcome: Students will describe, share, and discuss their personal reactions to a range of texts across genres, topics, and subjects.

The outcome will be met because when reading to dogs, children are more forthcoming and often share and discuss their personal reactions. Handlers can also help elicit the reader's reaction. Children are often genuinely concerned with the dogs' enjoyment of the story and want to share their personal reactions with the dogs. According to Bernstein-Wax (2010), a child was initially concerned when a dog wandered off during the reading because the end of the story would be missed (p. 2). These are important observations that connect the child's engagement to the story and the desire to share their reactions.

#### Beyond Language Arts

With dog-assisted reading, there are cross-curricular implications. Generally, since every subject demands an ability to read texts, improvements in reading can help make reading and learning content in other subjects less daunting. Many children involved in dog-assisted reading experience improved confidence and self-esteem; this can potentially positively impact other subject areas. When we feel good about ourselves, most things seem a little less intimidating. The presence of a dog can reduce anxiety; this can help in other subjects where students feel anxious. For example, I have witnessed many students who experience anxiety when it comes to math and when their anxiety is tempered, their performance improves.

Specifically, there are Grade Five outcomes beyond Language Arts that can be connected to dog-assisted reading. In health there is an entire unit dedicated to environmental health. As stated previously, without a connection to the environment, there is little desire to protect it. The presence of a dog can help students feel a greater

connection to the environment and bring greater understanding and depth to this unit. In addition, according to the Department of Education Elementary Health Curriculum Guide (n.d.), “the grade five student will identify personal interests, abilities and strengths, . . . and understand that the way we are treated impacts on self-esteem and general emotional well-being” (p. 30). This outcome can be enhanced through the use of dog-assisted reading. For many children, dogs are a personal interest and, if they are present in school, an opportunity is available for children to showcase their interest and, in some cases, their ability or strength to interact well with them. Further, by being treated without judgment and with the love and loyalty from a dog, teachers and handlers can stress this treatment and its impact on our self-esteem and well being more generally.

Additionally, there are outcomes in the Grade Five religion program that can be enhanced through a dog-assisted reading program. According to the Department of Education Elementary Religion Curriculum Guide (2000), “the grade five student will demonstrate an understanding of loyalty and trust” (p. 46). The example from a dog about loyalty and trust would clarify this outcome for several students. It is also expected that students “explore Christian and Hindu teachings concerning respect for people, property and animals” (Department of Education, 2000, p. 48). With a living animal in the classroom, what an opportunity for teachers to explore this outcome and learn first-hand how to be respectful of a living animal!

#### Beyond the Curriculum

Beyond curriculum outcomes, there are a plethora of life skills that will develop from spending intimate time with another living creature. Bullying has become an increasingly

dangerous problem in schools with consequences as severe as some students taking their lives over relentless taunting, harassment, and exclusion. Less severe but still serious and in need of attention are the countless students avoiding school, experiencing anxiety, and simply feeling miserable. Most schools engage in anti-bullying assemblies, programs, and disciplinary actions targeted at the bully. In my experience the biggest weapon against bullying and support to the wounded is kindness. When the culture of a school is focussed overwhelmingly on kindness, bullying incidents decrease. Perhaps the greatest asset of children reading with dogs is the kindness and empathy that develops when children spend personal time with animals (Arkow, 2006; Melson, 2001; Sakson, 2009). On a much smaller scale, when dogs are in our school even for a brief visit, the climate and culture of the school shifts. Often it can be the more aggressive children who are the most moved by the presence of a dog. They do not want the dog upset by loud noises or rough play. These same students suddenly have soft voices, gentle hands, and an instant kindness and empathy toward other living creatures. I can only imagine and hope to see the impact with consistent, expected, routine dog visits. According to Chandler (2001), animal-assisted therapy can help curb violence in schools. Human attitudes toward animals spike when there are animals in the classroom and even after one year, these human attitudes persisted. These empathetic attitudes towards animals also transferred to more empathetic attitudes toward people (p. 4).

This effect is very similar to the impact babies have had in schools through the *Roots of Empathy* program the goal of which is to foster empathy in children and adults. Being able to take someone else's perspective, share feelings, and see how we are

interconnected promotes peace. Classrooms become safer and more caring through the “emotional literacy” that is taught in the program. With children having less time face to face with each other, the idea of a baby and his or her parent visiting the class brings a personal human interaction lacking more and more in classrooms and in society generally. By learning to relate to each other, bullying is less likely. When children are involved in social and emotional learning programs, they have better social and emotional skills (Gordon & Green, 2008). Just as babies invoke empathy in classrooms, dogs have the same potential when consistently interacting in classrooms and schools. Different children react to different stimuli. Often we do not know the emotional and lasting impact a classroom event or experience can have. We owe it to children to present as many different opportunities as possible to encourage empathy and connection. Dogs are yet another vehicle for peace and joy that could have a profound impact. Gordon & Green (2008) write about a powerful impact *Roots of Empathy* had on a student in Grade 8 who had witnessed his mother’s murder and then was in and out of several foster homes. Troubled and disruptive, there was little hope for this student. At the end of one session students were asked if anyone wanted to try on the Snugli. He stayed back and put it on. He asked to hold the baby and reluctantly the mother agreed. The baby snuggled into him and he quietly rocked the baby for several minutes. When he returned the baby to his mother, he asked a powerful question wondering if nobody has ever loved you, could you still be a good father (p. 34). That is only one story documented. There are likely many more powerful examples that educators may never know that demonstrate the effect and

impact a particular experience has on any one student. The presence of a dog may elicit the power to change, to empathize, and to connect.

Despite the word social in social networking, it seems today more than ever we are distancing ourselves from each other. Video games where you play virtual partners, headsets connected to digital devices, and online learning are devaluing and diminishing interactive, face to face contact and cooperation. This concerns me greatly. A smile, a hug, or simply eye contact can instantly send a message of care and kindness. So many students come to school yearning for physical contact and, sadly, teachers now are reluctant to respond. Combating isolation at a time when much of our culture pushes remoteness can be accomplished through reading to dogs. The photographs and videos of current dog-assisted reading programs show beautiful examples of a hand on a paw or a dog's head in the lap of a child. The beautiful gaze from a dog conveys a message of acceptance, kindness, and love. This is something of which we do not have enough in schools. Most people yearn to belong and being with a dog is a tremendous sense of belonging. Students also develop relationships with the handlers and having guests in the classroom promotes a sense of community and togetherness. Further, for children who have difficulty socializing and connecting with others, according to Jalongo et al. (2004), the presence of a dog can draw other people into their circle (p. 10). This can be extremely beneficial to support the goals of inclusion.

Another important life skill enhanced by reading with dogs is responsibility. Students feel very responsible for the dogs in their presence and this sense of responsibility will serve children well into their future. Whether a student goes on to

become a parent, pet owner, employee, or life-partner, having a sense of responsibility and caring for another living being will be life serving. Even personal hygiene has been shown to increase with many children involved in dog-assisted reading programs (Intermountain Therapy Animals, n.d.; Jalongo et al., 2004).

As an educator, one of my greatest hopes for my students is for them to be proud of themselves now and forever. To take pride in oneself requires confidence. One way to build confidence is to have opportunities to be leaders. Research has shown that often when children read to dogs, they become such good readers that they actually serve as mentors to others in the program (Harrington, n.d.; Newlin, 2003). Such mentoring can go a long way toward developing confidence and building leadership and therefore pride in oneself and one's abilities.

The better we feel about ourselves, the better equipped we are to take care of ourselves, each other, and our environment. The damage humans have done to the environment is devastating. We need to reconnect with our world and show it care and respect. Schools have a responsibility to prepare students to be environmentally responsible and to narrow the gap between our environment and us that has been broadening exponentially over time. This disconnect allows us to be less thoughtful and less careful with our treatment of the world. Intimate experiences with animals and the environment will help build this reconnection. Without a connection to Earth we will have no desire to save it (Davis et al., 2008; Gruenewald, 2003a; Gruenewald, 2003b; Melson, 2001; Norman, 2006; Pattnaik, 2004; Ross, 2011). Gruenewald (2003b) finely summarizes this idea when he writes, "the meaning of human social development and the

meaning of literacy must be recovered from our shared human heritage in which human beings developed a sense of interconnection with nonhuman others” (p. 33). We desperately need consistent experiences and opportunities to reconnect and dogs are one way to start.

In the forthcoming final section, the ideas previously presented will be developed into a proposal for a dog-assisted reading.

#### Proposal

My experiences currently teaching in a primary/elementary school convince me that it would be a smooth transition to bring dog-assisted reading to children in this province. Already, there are programs like *Roots of Empathy* and *ArtsSmarts* available in some classrooms in some schools. This implementation would be similar. Partnering with the greater community is the common thread between these programs and is a link to dog-assisted reading programs too. The possibility and necessity of partnerships beyond the immediate school are incredibly valuable. *Roots of Empathy* has been in schools across Canada since 1996. The program centers on a neighbourhood infant and parent who engage students in the classroom. A trained *Roots of Empathy* instructor guides the students as they witness the relationship between baby and parent with special attention to the baby’s emotions. Seeing this relationship helps children articulate their own emotions and acknowledge the emotions of others thereby improving empathy (*Roots of Empathy*, 2012). Similarly partnering has worked well to develop the *ArtsSmarts* program. *ArtsSmarts* has been in schools across Canada since 1998. The program generates innovative school partnerships to use the arts to create a different environment for

learning, one that aims to improve student engagement and wherein students think creatively, form deep understandings, and take control of their own learning. Students and teachers work with others and think about their work and learning. It is for any grade level and is developed by and with teachers along with artists. It is not a packaged curriculum but rather one that is customized for each particular group of learners (*ArtsSmarts*, n.d.).

Dog-assisted reading would not be an add-on or extra. It is not something else for teachers to “cover”. Instead, it is meant to supplement current Grade Five literacy teaching and classroom practice as evidenced in the curriculum outcomes covered previously in this chapter and, with potential for additional outcomes being enhanced in other subject areas. There would not be additional teacher supervision required, as it would be part of the Language Arts curriculum and classroom. The vision is that during reading instruction and practice, as is already seen in many classrooms today, small groups would be working with classroom teachers and instructional resource teachers while other students would be reading independently and yet others with their peers. The new aspect would be the group of students reading to dogs and handlers.

The pilot program will run once a week for eight weeks. Teachers are constantly assessing students’ reading levels so the timing would need to be such that reading levels are assessed before the dogs begin and then immediately after the program ends to monitor the validity of the program and track improvements. As part of routine observation and assessment of and for learning, teachers would use existing methods like

clipboard cruising, running records, and others to assess students. Again, this monitoring would not be an add-on, but should blend with existing practices.

Due to the necessity of keeping the program small, initially, it would be offered within the Eastern School District only. This parameter keeps access to dogs and handlers to larger urban centers where the largest populations of dogs and handlers are and where program supports are most easily available. When a suitable supply of dogs and handlers is trained and ready to go, a presentation to principals would be scheduled to explain the program. Administrators will appreciate that since the program is operating within an existing program, liability insurance is provided. With the support of the Board and principals, interested schools could then apply. The application process would lend itself to self-selection by enthusiastic, responsive and open-minded teachers and administrators.

To apply for the program, schools would need to meet several conditions paralleled by the conditions already explained earlier in the chapter. The application process would also include logistical information to help match handlers to schools to ensure the handler can physically get to the location. Obviously, the number of schools able to be serviced would be dependent on the number of dog and handlers and their physical proximity to the school. In the application, schools would:

- Outline current Language Arts programs for reading development. Classrooms using basal readers with children independently working would not be a good match. Classrooms engaged in guided reading activities where groups of students work through reading activities in a variety of group structures would be a better fit as the program would more easily blend with existing structures.

- Identify why they should be considered. This section should include an account of general trends in reading. Reading levels from running records or other assessments and provincial assessments indicating reading performance within the school would help paint a picture of reading needs within the school. Dogs bring more than reading to schools; their presence can make a positive impact in the lives of children facing other obstacles too. Therefore schools should consider other challenges along with reading issues that would make the joy of dogs an important addition to the lives of their school community.
- Provide information on logistics of the school. Is the Grade Five classroom large enough to accommodate an area for the student, dog, and handler? Or, is there a multi-purpose room that could serve the same purpose? In addition, students or staff with severe allergies should be acknowledged.

As stated throughout this thesis, reading is a non-negotiable requirement in elementary schools. Ultimately, the goal of reading with dogs is to help children become more proficient, confident, happy readers. It is necessary to look at the curriculum unit in two ways. Since the program will be operated within schools in this province, respect and attention must be paid to their goals, aims, and objectives. First, the unit will be developed with respect to current expectations laid out by the Department of Education for reading using Tyler's (2004) four fundamental questions for developing curriculum and planning instruction:

- What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?

- What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes?
- How can these educational experiences be effectively organized?
- How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained? (p. 51).

The curriculum plan also must include, embrace and celebrate the outcomes not necessarily found in the packaged programs. While dog-assisted reading has the potential to assist in the delivery and implementation of prescribed curriculum outcomes as set out by the Department of Education, the second part of the curriculum unit will look beyond prescribed outcomes to deeper roots of curriculum by delving beyond the prescribed, into greater connections to goals of communication, collaboration, and cooperation as supported by curriculum writers (Dewey, 2004; Doll, 2004; Eisner, 2004; Noddings, 2004).

Another part of the curriculum unit can be found in Appendix C. This annotated bibliography includes an assortment of resources for students, teachers, and facilitators of dog-assisted reading programs. While not mandatory, this comprehensive list features themes and curriculum connections related to dog-assisted reading. Facilitators may want to consider selections to supplement their program.

Curriculum Unit  
R.E.A.D. ®  
Reading Education Assistance Dogs®  
Dogs Helping Readers



Content Area	Language Arts – Literacy - Reading
Grade Level	Five
<u>Purpose:</u> Essential Graduation Learnings	Citizenship - specifically environmental interdependence Communication - expanding students ability to use language effectively
<u>Purpose:</u> General Curriculum Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-speak and listen to explore, extend, clarify, and reflect on their thoughts, ideas, feelings, and experiences</li> <li>-communicate information and ideas effectively and clearly, and to respond personally and critically</li> <li>-interact with sensitivity and respect, considering the situation, audience, and purpose</li> <li>-interpret, select, and combine information using a variety of strategies, resources, and technologies</li> <li>-respond personally to a range of texts</li> <li>-respond critically to a range of texts, applying their understanding of language, form, and genre</li> </ul>
<u>Purpose:</u> Specific Curriculum Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-contribute to and respond constructively in conversation, small-group, and whole-group discussion, recognizing their roles and responsibilities as speakers and listeners</li> <li>-use word choice, tone of voice, and facial expression appropriate to the speaking occasion</li> <li>-demonstrate an awareness of the needs, rights, and feelings of others by listening attentively and speaking in a manner appropriate to the situation</li> <li>-consider purpose and the needs and expectations of their audiences</li> <li>-select, independently, texts appropriate to their interests and learning needs</li> <li>-read widely and experience a variety of children’s literature with an emphasis in genre and authors</li> </ul>

	-describe, share, and discuss their personal reactions to a range of texts across genres, topics, and subjects
<u>Experience:</u> Unit Description	Children will read with a dog and the dog's handler in a safe, inviting, non-judgmental environment. This will be an integrated part of the Language Arts program and literacy plan for the classroom.
<u>Organized:</u>	Program will take place once a week for eight weeks within the classroom Language Arts structure to supplement existing reading programs.
<u>Organized:</u> Resources	Necessary resources for the R.E.A.D. ® program will be supplied as part of the training. Therefore the only resources necessary would be the books already available within the classroom and library settings. Schools would not need to purchase any additional resources.
<u>Attained:</u> Assessment	Informal assessments will be used including student response journals, teachers' informal observations and anecdotal comments. Formal assessments of running records will be used at the beginning and end of the program to measure changes in reading performance.
<u>Attained:</u> Reflection	Teacher reflection Student reflection Parent/Guardian reflection (see appendix)

While there is incredible merit to dogs and reading under the specific outcomes set out by the province, there is potential to fill a greater need beyond the prescribed curriculum. Many curriculum writers support and demand that educators look to a greater depth of learning beyond what is measured on standardized tests. Therefore this second part of the curriculum unit has powerful consequences beyond reading the word to thriving in the world inside and outside the classroom.

Communication is deeply enhanced when children read with dogs. The quality of conversation in school must be high and as educators one of our objectives is to help students learn to converse well. Challenging kinds of conversations in schools is too uncommon (Eisner, 2004). Too often school conversations are predictable and routine. Not enough preparation is done to help children ask tough questions, debate, and

challenge views and opinions. As students work with the dog and handler, they develop stronger communication skills that will serve them throughout their lives.

The success of programs like *Roots of Empathy* and *ArtsSmarts* would not be possible without cooperation, collaboration and community involvement. The same potential is possible in bringing dogs and their handlers to the school community. School is a social institution and must be seen as a part of community life. The classroom community should be responsible for curriculum, but it is also responsible for much more. Schools must be designed so that learners can come together to collaborate with one another. Courses need to be cooperatively developed with students' interest and talents in mind (Dewey, 2004; Doll, 2004; Eisner, 2004; Noddings, 2004). By partnering with members of the greater community, we will bring an enhanced social element to schools thereby celebrating the importance of cooperation, community, and collaboration.

Too often, what is forgotten in curriculum design and planning is happiness. So much of education is about where it will lead financially in terms of employment with little consideration given to what makes us happy. We often choose to do something because we like how it feels and who we become while we are engaged in that activity. Happiness must be a goal of education; it impacts our place and way in society and can transform society in a very positive way (Eisner, 2004; Noddings, 2004). One look at children reading to dogs and their happiness is obvious.

Our interconnection and interdependence with other living creatures and our environment is critical. O'Sullivan (2008) writes, "If we do not consider that we are in a web of life and if we consider ourselves above it, we are going to get into even greater

trouble than we are already in" (p. xiii). To spend quality time with a dog has the potential to integrate children into the web of life instead of thinking they are above.

Finally, perhaps the most important life-learning outcome met through dogs and reading is enhanced humanity. Empathy and kindness increase when in the company of dogs. Melson (2001) writes about how being around animals helps us be more patient and kind (p. 76). While empathy and kindness may not be measurable outcomes or standards and are not found in the multiple choice or open response questions of provincial assessments, they are grossly needed in our schools and are abundant features within dog-assisted reading programs (Melson, 2001; Sakson, 2009). Given that empathy and kindness increase when children are involved in dog-assisted reading programs, there should be a positive anti-bullying impact and promote a more tolerant and kind school setting.

#### Recommendations

For the smooth implementation of a dog-assisted reading program in a school, there are several recommendations that will benefit all stakeholders involved:

- Planning and implementing dog-assisted reading will require time and effort and eager teachers and administrators. Time for planning, developing, and scheduling a dog-assisted reading program is necessary. Therefore, it is recommended that interested schools consider their current programs and planning time schedules to ensure they can make time for proper implementation.
- It is also recommended that if a dog-assisted program is piloted, the Eastern School District use its literacy specialists to monitor, assess, and validate dog-

assisted reading by keeping records of evaluations and reading improvements and analysing them to confirm the validity of the program.

- Teachers involved with dog-assisted reading are encouraged to become action-researchers and track reading, learning, and general classroom changes to assist the District in monitoring the validity of the program and its future direction.
- Consideration will need to be given to the strengths and challenges of dog-assisted reading and whether the program needs to be modified, customized, and/or expanded.
- It is recommended that the district be open to providing professional development opportunities for schools interested in dog-assisted reading. Some examples of the District's investment in professional development would be approving a school's request and agenda for an in-school workshop for teachers and staff to explore dog-assisted reading for their stakeholders. Or, the District could host a district-wide session on dog-assisted reading as evidence of its investment in professional development.

### Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to present a compelling argument for dog-assisted reading in Newfoundland and Labrador. Teachers, administrators, and District personnel need to take the lead in this quest for an alternative approach to reading and learning. This thesis is merely the beginning of exploring how dogs can assist students with their reading. With so many children struggling with reading and reading being a strong requirement in school, this initial step is an important start, but much more is needed.

With limited existing reading resources, teachers yearn for other methods they might investigate for use in their classrooms. As this thesis shows, while there is potential for reading to improve within a dog-assisted reading program, there is also tremendous possibility in other vital areas both within the prescribed curriculum and beyond. It is exciting to consider the possibilities beyond dog-assisted reading as an innovative literacy program. Helping influence students to become environmentally connected and concerned is a positive side effect from spending time with dogs. Further, having dogs in our schools can help us all become more loving, compassionate, and accepting of each other.

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## Appendix

### APPENDIX A: Other Dog Assisted Reading Programs

#### *PAWS for a Story*

The Pet Therapy Society for Northern Alberta offers a reading program called PAWS for a Story. The program is described on the Pet Therapy Society for Northern Alberta website. Children gain confidence as they read with the dogs and his or her handler. The positive environment eases the learning experience. Fourteen of the seventeen public libraries in Edmonton offer the program (Pet therapy Society, 2010).

#### *Read to the Dogs*

Rainbow Animal Assisted Therapy offers a reading program in the Chicago area called Read to the Dogs. They also offer a course which is a requirement before being able to volunteer in any of their programs. The focus of the program is to enhance children's reading experiences making it fun and less threatening (Rainbow Animal Assisted Therapy, 2010).

#### *Reading with Rover*

The Reading with Rover program is entering its tenth year and has been positively influencing students. In the video, "Reading with Rover", program founder, Becky Bishop through the Regence Group (2010) states, "The magical thing that happens when kids read to dogs is dogs don't judge them - is they tend to be more relaxed when they're reading to the dog and the parents have told us the children tend to read five times longer" (The Regence Group, 2010). The Reading with Rover website (2010) boasts fabulous results, "At Woodmoor Elementary School (just one of our current 'read' locations), the

Reading with Rover program is showing great results. Kids are more excited about reading because reading to a dog is more fun.” School staff chooses children for the program who are between seven and twelve years old and are either reading below grade level, have self-esteem issues, or are considered “at risk” (Reading With Rover, 2010b). The Reading with Rover website (2010c) highlights the many benefits teachers have seen in addition to improved reading:

- Decreased absenteeism
  - Kids have improved self- confidence and self-esteem
  - Kids have a sense of pride in their accomplishments
  - Kids become involved in other school activities
  - Kids have improved hygiene
  - Kids are gentler and have more respectful interactions with animals
  - Kids find reading fun and volunteer to read aloud in class
  - Kids check out books from the library and ask the librarian about books
- (Reading With Rover, 2010c).

There is plenty of information through the Reading with Rover website on how to become a dog and handler team. Interested participants must be registered which includes a formal evaluation. Then 10 hours of visits are required with at least one monitored hour through Northhaven □ Assisted Living in Seattle. Then it is necessary to shadow an existing team. A written log must be completed documenting the visits. There is also information on how to start up one’s own reading program (Reading With Rover, 2010a). They are very respectful of Intermountain Therapy Animals’ program R.E.A.D., and even

recommend using it as a reference to get more information. The biggest challenge is having enough dogs and handlers to meet the demand.

#### Reading Fur Fun

Potter League for Animals offers a dog assisted reading program called Reading Fur Fun. The mission of the Potter League for Animals is stated on their website (2010):

The Potter League for Animals is dedicated to making a difference in the lives of animals. We promote the humane treatment of all animals and provide shelter and care for lost or unwanted companion animals. Through community education and the fostering of relationships between people and animals, we enhance the animals' future and enrich the human experience (Potter League for Animals, 2010).

The program is based on Intermountain Therapy Animals' R.E.A.D. program. Hargreaves (2006) wrote, "The Potter League's "Reading Fur Fun" program is based on R.E.A.D. principles but is formally classified as Animal Assisted Activity (AAA) rather than Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) because the sessions do not have pre-determined and specific therapeutic outcomes and the program is staffed by volunteers rather than therapists" (p. 1). The program has been running since May 2002.

#### Caring Canine Dr. Dogs

The Caring Canine Dr. Dogs program is Canadian and run by Toronto Therapy Dogs. They offer free animal assisted therapy and activities to the communities in Toronto. The Caring Canine website (2009) stated, "Our Professor Dogs (therapy dogs) read with students/children to improve their literacy or numeracy; communication or

socialization skills; and self-concept or confidence through our *Professor Dogs* programs at schools” (Caring Canine, 2009, p. 1). Similar to other programs, an evaluation and several visits, some monitored, are required before admittance to the program. All teams are also reviewed twice a year. LaRose (2009) wrote, “Professor Dogs are teamed with students who may be dealing with literacy problems, learning challenges, need help working on communication and socialization skills, and boosting their confidence” (p. 1). LaRose also wrote about the requirements for dogs and their handlers. There is no tolerance for any aggression from the dog toward another dog or people. They have to show general obedience and if successful then show more specific tolerance for loud noises, being touched all over the body, or being bumped. The membership fee is over five hundred dollars which helps to cover liability costs.

## Appendix B: Program Reflection Forms

The following reflection sheets would be given to teachers, students, and parents/care-givers immediately following the last session to gain valuable insight into their assessment of the program. This information would be used moving forward to improve the program.

Dog-Assisted Reading  
Teacher Reflection

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Student Name	Running Record Score before program	Running Record Score after program

Comments:

1. Do students exhibit a greater enjoyment of reading since participating in the R.E.A.D. ® program?

- Yes
- Somewhat
- No

Comments:

2. Do students exhibit a greater confidence with reading since participating in the R.E.A.D. ® program?
- Yes
  - Somewhat
  - No

Comments:

3. Have you noticed any changes in the climate and culture of the classroom since participating in the program? (ie. behaviour, attitude, interactions with one another)
4. What has worked best in the program?
5. What changes need to be made moving forward?

Dog-Assisted Reading  
Student Reflection

1. Have you noticed an improvement in your reading since participating in the R.E.A.D. ® program?

- Yes. Lots!
- Some
- No

Comments:

2. Do you enjoy reading more since participating in the R.E.A.D. ® program?

- Yes. Lots!
- Some
- No

Comments:

3. Are you reading more since participating in the R.E.A.D. ® program?

- A lot (by more than 30 minutes a week)
- Some (less than 30 minutes a week)
- No

Comments:

4. Do you feel more confident when you read?

- Yes. Lots!
- Some
- No

Comments:

5. What is the best part of the program?

6. Do you think your class or classmates have changed since the program started?

7. Do you have any suggestions to improve the program?

Dog-Assisted Reading  
Parent/Guardian Reflection

1. Have you noticed an improvement in your child's reading since participating in the R.E.A.D. ® program?
  - Significant improvement
  - Some improvement
  - No improvement

Comments:

1. Does your child appear to enjoy reading more since participating in the R.E.A.D. ® program?
  - Very much
  - Somewhat
  - Not at all

Comments:

2. Is your child reading more since participating in the R.E.A.D. ® program?
  - A lot (by more than 30 minutes a week)
  - Some (less than 30 minutes a week)
  - None

Comments:

3. Has your child's confidence with reading increased since being involved in the program?
- Very much
  - Somewhat
  - Not at all

Comments:

4. What is the best part of the program?

5. Have you noticed any other changes in your child other than reading since participating in the program?

Do you have any suggestions to improve the program?

## Appendix C: Annotated Bibliography

The following resources are intended for facilitators of, or participants in dog-assisted reading programs. The selected literature supports the objectives of dog-assisted reading programs – empathy, nature, love, literacy, learning, and animals are common themes. Many of the selected readings are high interest books for children reading to dogs. Others will help adults think differently about how children learn, what challenges they face, and how love can often change the way we are in the world. The children’s selections can be used as read-alouds for sheer enjoyment, choices for children to read to dogs, or as more in-depth units. Some of the selections are suitable for launches to writing, or other curricular areas. There are some recommendations as to how these might be used in classrooms, however, teachers will take these good reads and use them in ways that are appropriate for their students’ needs. The following list is only scratching the surface of classroom resources that might be used to enhance literacy, connections with animals and the environment, and humanity. It may serve as a springboard for the reader to consider other favourite books, forgotten treasures like songs or movies that are worthy of sharing in the classroom.

Abercrombie, B. (1990). *Charlie Anderson*. New York, NY: Aladdin Paperbacks.

Dealing with change is a challenge. Divorce for young children who are spending time between two homes can be a big adjustment. This book helps children who are in a similar situation see that spending time between two homes is okay.

Charlie, the cat, does it every day. Two houses, two beds, two families that love you is pretty good fortune. Children long and deserve to see themselves

represented in texts. This would be especially fitting within the health curriculum unit on relationships when discussing families.

Atwood, M. (2003). *Oryx and crake*. Toronto, ON : Random House of Canada.

For adults who may not yet believe the severity of the situation with our Earth, they might be moved by this work of fiction. For a vivid reminder of the necessity of caring for our environment before it is destroyed, this is an important read.

Brookes, C. (Producer). (2001). *Survivor* [Radio broadcast]. St. John's, NL: Battery Radio.

A greater lesson in humanity, I have yet to find. Through the story of Lanier Phillips and the people of St. Lawrence and surrounding communities, this is a must-listen for all students in this province. It is an incredible recount of bravery, compassion, and love. It is an important listen regardless of its curriculum connections; however, it speaks to the curriculum in many ways and for every grade level. There are opportunities for discussions about stereotyping, inclusion, human rights, forgiveness, and love.

Cherry, L. (1990). *The great kapok tree: A tale of the Amazon rain forest*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc.

This beautifully illustrated picture book tells the story of a community of animals that live in the rain forest. Through their story, the reader learns of the interconnectedness of our creatures, humans, and Earth, and the responsibility of humans to zealously defend the environment.

Cleary, B. (1991). *Strider*. New York, NY: Morrow Junior Books.

The love and comfort a dog can bring is wonderfully described in this novel. Leigh finds an abandoned dog and brings him home. They quickly bond and Strider helps Leigh cope with the many changes in his life. The undeniable loyalty a dog willingly shares is evident throughout this read. This also crosses over nicely to health and family relationships.

Collins, G. (2009). *What colour is the ocean?* St. John's, NL: Flanker Press

With such a need for an appreciation of our environment, this is a great motivator to look beyond your inside world and look outside at the colours surrounding you. This picture book is an exploration of the changing colours of the ocean depending on season or weather. Teaching at a school that overlooks Conception Bay, I know how eager my students are to look out and see what colour or movement the ocean holds. This gem written by a Newfoundland and Labrador author could be writing about any of the ocean views students across this great province witness.

Cooney, B. (1982). *Miss Rumphius*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.

In the day-to-day rush of life, we often forget to appreciate our surrounding beauty. Miss Rumphius reminds us of this since she too, forgets to enjoy and nurture the environment. Not until she is sick in bed and looking out the window, does she remember her grandfather reminding her to make the world more beautiful. At his encouragement, she decides to plant lupines wherever she travels. This ties in nicely to units about planting and enhancing schools and school grounds.

Crocker, G. (2011). *Finding Jack*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Jack is a Labrador Retriever nursed back to health by an American soldier who himself is walking wounded not just from his war experiences, but also because of the tragic and untimely death of his parents. As Fletcher Carson patrols the jungles of Vietnam with his faithful companion, he learns how to want to live again. The healing abilities from a deep relationship between humans and dogs are revealed. It is inspiring to watch as Fletcher refuses to abandon his faithful friend, and so begins another journey that will bring his life meaning. This story is based on the very real policy of the American Armed forces that saw the abandonment of thousands of dogs.

DiCamillo, K. *Because of Winn-Dixie*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

When Opal sees a stray dog in the supermarket, Winn-Dixie, she is struck by how ugly and dirty he is, but she is most taken with his smile. She has never seen a dog smile at her before and it captivates her. When she talks, he listens. The dog gives Opal the courage to ask her father about her mother who left when she was very young. The dog, now named Winn-Dixie brings Opal and her father much closer.

Doty, M. (2007). *Dog years*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

Learning life lessons from animals is clear in this poignant memoir targeted at adults. Wanting a companion for his dying partner, the author, decides to adopt a second dog. The intimate companionship from dogs is beautifully illustrated through Doty's journey. His dogs bring him hope and love through his heartache and loss.

Dr. Seuss. (1971). *The Lorax*. New York, NY: Random House.

This cautionary tale blends the rhymes and fun expected from Dr. Seuss with a serious warning. Protect the earth, or face serious irreversible consequences.

Adults and children alike need to sit up and take notice through the use of original characters and wacky illustrations showing how greed is allowing us to destroy our world in a hurry. Consumerism and materialism are two themes found throughout the religion and health curricula and this children's book gently introduces children to these concepts.

Duke, K. (1992). *Aunt Isabel tells a good one*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.

The importance of a good story is showcased in this picture book. Aunt Isabel and her niece work together to create a story. This book might help young readers on their own writing journey - moving them to take pencil to paper and write a story of their own.

Fine, A. H. (Ed.). (2006). *Handbook on animal-assisted therapy: Theoretical foundations and guidelines for practice* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

For a comprehensive overview of therapy animals from a multitude of authors, this book is an excellent resource for individuals involved with therapy dogs.

Most of the research I read referred to this work. It is well-organized and wide-ranging. From varying perspectives, this work helps explain why animals have such a strong impact on people, especially children.

Fitch, S. (1997). *There's a mouse in my house*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Talking about homelessness can be challenging, but this book gently opens a dialogue. This brilliantly illustrated picture book tells the story of a young boy who is pressured by his mother to rid them of the mice who have entered their home. His conflict between pleasing his mother and not harming the mice is evident and his final decision reminds us all how important it is to respect all living creatures.

Fitch, S. (2001). *Everybody's different on everybody street*. Halifax, NS: Nova Scotia Hospital Foundation.

Supporting the goals of inclusion, this picture book was written to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Festival of Trees in support of the Nova Scotia Hospital. Quick rhymes invite the reader into a world that celebrates how we are different, but also how we are the same.

Fountas, I. C., & Pinnell, G. S. (1996). *Guided reading: Good first teaching for all children*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

This is a great resource for teachers interested in developing a balanced literacy program. The authors answer many of the questions teachers have about teaching reading. Through their own teaching experience and research, they help teachers develop literacy programs.

Godkin, C. (1989). *Wolf island*. Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside.

This beautifully illustrated picture book is full of lovely images of many types of wildlife from wolves to rabbits, deer to fox, and many more. This story helps the reader understand the food chain and the impact one change can make to its

balance. There are important lessons for humans of not taking more than you need. This book blends nicely with diversity of life outcomes in the science curriculum.

Grogan, J. (2005). *Marley & me: Life and love with the world's worst dog*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

Marley is a Yellow Labrador Retriever like no other. The author relates his experiences with Marley, the dog with a heart of gold and the instincts of a reform school inmate. Obedience school failure, Marley destroys our preconceptions of what is behind the badly behaved dog as he destroys the home and belongings of his owner. The ending is so heart-breaking through the author's clear description. This is a skilfully written and emotionally-charged book.

Gruen, S. (2006). *Water for elephants*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill.

Set in America during the depression, *Water for Elephants* follows Jacob, a former veterinary school student, whose parents are killed in a car accident causing Jacob to check out of his life. He literally runs away to the circus. Jacob is drawn to the elephants and comes to understand the abuse they suffer at the hands of the circus owner. Jacob's growing sense of morality and outrage begs the question, do we have the right to capture and contain wild animals? Or, if we do are we not stepping outside the web of life and trying to be above it?

Hartman, S. (Producer). (2009, January 2). *The animal odd couple* [Television broadcast]. New York, NY: CBS. Retrieved <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=4696315n>

This is a great video on friendship. Two unlikely souls unite in companionship with unconditional trust. We can learn a lot about appreciating differences from this beautiful example. There is an opportunity to discuss sanctuaries and the need for them, as animals are outcast from what some people consider entertainment - zoos, circuses, television appearances, and movies.

Hickok, L. (1958). *The story of Helen Keller*. New York, NY : Scholastic.

Even though this is a fictionalized account of Helen's life, when I have used it as a read-aloud with my students, it has opened a dialogue of how differently we all learn. Children, who struggle, especially, are moved by the determination Helen shows to overcome adversity. The tenacity and creativity Miss Anne Sullivan shows in teaching Helen are powerful reminders to educators to always look for the potential in children, and to constantly seek new methods of engaging children. The images of Helen with her dog Belle yet again show the power of a dog to love without limit.

Jane, P. W., Lollis, S., & Hogan, J. (2003). *Should we have pets? A persuasive text*. New York, NY: Mondo Publishing.

Second grade students present arguments for and against pet ownership. This captivates students because many have their own opinions on this issue and they are eager to read work written by other students. It is a great launch to teaching persuasive writing.

Kihn, M. (2011). *Bad dog (A love story)*. New York, NY: Random House.

This true story for adults is funny and sad, dark and uplifting. Hola, the beautiful Bernese Mountain Dog rules the house while his owner Marty uses alcohol to escape. Faced with the possibility of losing his job and his wife, Marty realizes he needs to change. He and Hola work to gain her Canine Good Citizen test. It is a wonderful account of how badly some of us need our dogs, and how sometimes, perhaps, they need us too.

Kilodavis, C. (2011). *My princess boy*. New York, NY: Aladdin.

Just as dogs can teach us great lessons about not judging others, literature can often do the same. This picture book is a lesson on kindness, empathy, and acceptance. Whomever children are and however they choose to look, they deserve acceptance and support.

King, L. M. (2002). *Animal-assisted therapy: A guide for professional counselors, school counselors, social workers, and educators*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse.

For schools incorporating dog-assisted reading, this guide would be a welcome resource. This concise book supplies definitions of terms, benefits of animal assisted therapy, and handy references, as well as other useful information that can be obtained at a glance.

Kotzwinkle, W., & Murray, G. (2001). *Walter the farting dog*. Berkeley, CA, Frog, Ltd..

Seeing this book title has been the highlight of many of my students' reading. I was first introduced to Walter through a student who received this book for Christmas. Diagnosed with a reading disability, he never had enough confidence to read aloud until he got this book. He excitedly brought it to school and read it to

the class! Hysterical laughter is accompanied by the appreciation of feeling misjudged or misunderstood. There are four follow up books for children who want to keep reading about the adventures of Walter.

Louv, R. (2005). *Last child in the woods: Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill.

People need to have time outdoors. This influential work brings together new research that explains the importance for healthy childhood development to include time outdoors. Along with explaining the negative consequences of the lack of time outdoors for children and youth, Louv offers practical, simple ways to correct this crisis.

Mitchell, J. (1970). *Big yellow taxi*. On *Ladies of the canyon* [CD]. New York, NY: Siquomb.

Often serious conversations can be introduced with a song. Listening to *Big Yellow Taxi* opens a powerful dialogue on the consequences of our carelessness to Earth. After listening to the lyrics, students often question and criticize land near them that has been destroyed for big business gain.

Mitchell, J. (2011). *The circle game*. Markham, ON: Thomas Allen.

The theme of circles and wheels is predominant in Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting* which is how I first discovered this song. Imagery is a challenging concept for young students and the use of music is often a helpful tool. This song is useful in looking at the many ways a circle is symbolically used in literature. In

subjects like religion and science, it is a great connection to the life cycle. The illustrations in the picture book are engaging.

Mowat, F. (1957). *The dog who wouldn't be*. Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart.

One of Canada's most celebrated authors writes this true story about his childhood dog, Mutt. Mutt is a non-conformist dog who will delight and entertain readers of all ages through the adventures he brings the Mowat family. For anyone who has ever owned a dog, they will appreciate Mowat's story on many levels.

Nuzum, K. A. (2008). *The leanin' dog*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Children and adults both will be moved by the power of a dog in this novel. A stray dog brings courage and hope to Dessa and her father struggling to survive the loss of Dessa's mother. Images of nature and wildlife fill the pages and make the reader want to get outside.

Paterson, K. (1977). *Bridge to terabithia*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

This novel centers mainly on the time two friends spend outside creating their own universe. The sometimes complex relationships in families are explored. The power of friendship is central. The comfort a dog can bring during times of terrible loss is also an important theme.

Penn, A. (1993). *The kissing hand*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Our children need love. Dogs bring us that unconditionally. This picture book reminds us of the importance of love. For children apprehensive about school, they might be moved by Chester Raccoon's similar apprehensions. The love between Chester and his mother can be a comfort to readers confronting a difficult

situation, or needing reassurance. This story is a great reminder of the importance of love in our lives.

Perkins, A. (1967). *The digging-est dog*. New York, NY: Random House.

Caring for animals is a critical piece that can be explored through dog-assisted reading programs. This book can open a discussion around the buying and selling of animals. This picture book also tells of the joy a rescued animal experiences when given a good home. When the other dogs reject him because he cannot dig, an important discussion about exclusion can take place. In this rhyming short story, there are many lessons of working together, righting a wrong, and forgiving mistakes.

Rathman, P. (1995). *Officer Buckle & Gloria*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.

This is a really funny book, largely due to the illustrations. Nevertheless, Officer Buckle goes from school to school trying valiantly, but somewhat ineffectively and boringly to teach safety rules to children. Gloria is his dog who stands behind Officer Buckle and hilariously acts out each safety rule, engaging students' minds and readers' hearts.

Reilly-Giff, P. (2004). *Pictures of Hollis Woods*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

This novel has many themes. For the animal lover, the antics of the cantankerous cat Henry will keep you reading. The power of love and its capacity to save are clear through Hollis' journey. The images of nature are an inspiration to enjoy what surrounds us. Readers will empathize with Hollis and teachers might re-

consider what work they value from their students and how their backgrounds shape what they say and do in the classroom.

Reynolds Naylor, P. (2000). *Shiloh*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Several students that I have taught have been turned on to reading through this book. The first in the trilogy, it gives readers future books to look forward to reading. Many children can relate to wanting a dog, but even more powerful is Marty wanting the dog not just for himself, but to save Shiloh from the cruel hands and words of his current owner.

Ross, S. B. (2011). *The extraordinary spirit of Green Chimneys: Connecting children and animals to create hope*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press.

This incredible memoir is a must-read for adults looking to incorporate animals and/or the environment into their learning spaces. This memoir is the ideal, the model, for how animals and humans can work together to love and learn. At the campus of Green Chimneys, children learn about nature every day. Since 1947, Green Chimneys has been saving the lives of animals and children uniting them in ways that enrich their lives.

Rossiter McFarland, L. (2006). *Widget*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux Books for Young Readers.

Learning to get along well with each other is an important process developed in school. In this picture book, a scruffy homeless Westie named Widget hopes to make a home with six grouchy cats. To fit in, he adopts the mannerisms and behaviours, even the vocals of a cat. When their human falls and needs help

Widget finds his bark and they realize, despite their differences, they can be friends.

Seskin, S., & Shamblin, A. (2006). *A chance to shine*. Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press.

Spending time with dogs helps us learn compassion and kindness which are the themes of this children's book. Through a beautiful example of a kind act, the lives of several people are altered. (The book is accompanied by a compact disc featuring the text of the story in song format.)

Seskin, S., & Shamblin, A. (2002). *Don't laugh at me*. Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press.

One of the aims of dog-assisted reading is to help create a school climate and culture that helps diminish bullying. This book blends seamlessly with this lofty goal by calling for tolerance, kindness, and acceptance. (The book is accompanied by a compact disc featuring the text of the story in song format.)

Sherrard, V. (2007). *Speechless*. Toronto, ON: Dundurn Press.

Most children can relate to being treated unfairly. A great way to develop empathy is through literature that illustrates injustice. This novel moves some children to think beyond their immediate neighbourhood and consider global issues, like child soldiers. This work of fiction could be many of the youth in our country and beyond who have made change in their world. Griffin does not start out as an activist, he just wants to get out of public speaking, but what he learns changes him and the people around him.

Sierra, J. (2004). *Wild about books*. New York, NY: Random House.

Combining beasts and books makes this picture book a great addition to dog-assisted reading. When the librarian mistakenly drives her bookmobile into the zoo, she seeks to find perfect matches of books to beasts. Rhyming and fun, this book will certainly help young readers achieve what the title states. At times, the description of the zoo is reminiscent of a classroom where raccoons read alone and baboons read in bunches just as with dog-assisted reading.

Stepanek, M. (2001). *Heartsongs*. New York, NY: Hyperion.

Overcoming adversity is possible when the reader considers the challenges faced by Mattie Stepanek. Living with a rare form of muscular dystrophy and seeing the same disease take his three siblings makes Mattie wise beyond his years. To read his poems is to be uplifted and feel limitless love. Young readers, especially, might be encouraged to chronicle their own stories through writing when they learn he started writing poetry and short stories at only three years old. Although Mattie has since passed away, his message of home and love is timeless.

Stevens, J., & Stevens-Crummel, S. (2008). *Help me, Mr. Mut! Expert answers for dogs with people problems*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc.

Many children in dog-assisted reading programs would enjoy choosing this book to read to their canine friend. This funny picture book is written from a dog's perspective who writes letters to get advice on how to deal with his people problems.

Taylor, H. (2007). *Ruby's hope*. Winnipeg, MB: The Ladybug Foundation Education Program Inc.

This beautiful picture book helps reinforce the importance of empathy and care and kindness toward others. Young readers are inspired by the author who is a child herself and is moved to make change in the world. Using ladybugs and bumblebees creates a connection from the environment, to the important issue of homelessness.

Taylor, T. (1981). *The trouble with Tuck*. New York, NY: Dell Yearling.

When Helen's beloved dog Tuck starts to go blind and the veterinary care of the 1950s is unable to help him, his family finds him a companion dog. The passion and love Helen shows her dog is inspirational. The willingness she has to help Tuck through his challenges is beautiful.

Tolan, S. S. (2006). *Listen!*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

This novel is a perfect example of not getting the dog you want, but instead, getting the dog you need. Charley needs to heal physically and emotionally, and a wild dog is just her cure. Both knowing tremendous pain, they help each other find a way to persevere.

Trehearne, M. P. (2006). *Comprehensive literacy resource for grades 3-6 teachers*.

Scarborough, ON: Nelson Education.

Teachers will find a plethora of assessment tools and mini-lessons in this wide-ranging resource. It is user-friendly, and full of research-based information. Its literacy focus is cross-curricular and helps teachers to differentiate their instruction and use their assessments to guide their teaching.

Vasquez, V. M. (2010). *Getting Beyond 'I like the book': Creating space for critical literacy in k-6 classrooms*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association

This comprehensive teacher resource helps teachers apply critical literacy techniques with young children. This book blends information and research with practical classroom applications.

Viorst, J. (1971). *The tenth good thing about Barney*. New York, NY: Aladdin Paperbacks.

This beautiful story can be a springboard for writing. Students who have lost pets write ten good things about their own pets they have lost. Those who have pets write ten good things they want to share about their pet. Others can write ten good things about a family member or friend. It opens discussions about ways to share emotions and is great to use when a student has recently experienced a death of a pet or any kind of loss.

Walsh, A. (2001). *Heroes of Isle aux Morts*. Toronto, ON: Tundra Books.

This picture book is an important read for students of this province since it showcases the Harvey family, especially Anne and her Newfoundland dog, Hairy Man, and their valiant efforts to rescue shipwrecked passengers in Isle aux Morts. There is also an opportunity to connect this to Grade Five social studies where Newfoundland and Labrador is the focus. Students unfamiliar with Isle aux Morts will enjoy using technology like Google Earth to go on a virtual field trip! The painted illustrations offer an opportunity to extend this book into an art lesson on

the use of colour, as the artist, Geoff Butler's choice of colour reflects the story so perfectly.

White, E. B. (1952). *Charlotte's web*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Since valuing the web of life is so critical and tends to be lacking in many ways in schools, this novel is an important read. It serves as a reminder of the power, beauty, and importance of all living creatures.







