

An exploration of reading motivators and progress from the initiative 'reading with dogs'

Introduction

The aim of my study is to find out how to promote a love of reading where literacy is a barrier for learning.

The primary school, which will form the basis for this case study currently, uses many strategies to teach reading. Through discussion with teachers and parents it is evident many pupils are reluctant to read, leading to discussion regarding motivators.

There is a considerable body of research identifying a number of factors important to reading motivation including self-concept and value of reading, choice, time spent talking about books, types of text available, and the use of incentives. There are many views on the role of the teacher and motivation being critical to learning success.

Due to the range of reading interventions already in place in school I wanted to investigate a different approach.

The Reading Education Assistance Dogs® program improves children's reading and communication skills by encouraging children to read to a dog. R.E.A.D. dogs are registered therapy animals working in schools with their handler and acting as reading companions for children. R.E.A.D. was launched in 1999 as the first comprehensive literacy program built around the idea of reading to dogs.

The reading with dogs initiative is supported by the 'Burns By Your Side' (BBYS) charity and is working in partnership with R.E.A.D. Burns 'By Your Side' is one of a series of projects being developed to benefit communities via the Burns Pet Nutrition Foundation (Registered charity 1165392).

The purpose, therefore, of this case study is to gain knowledge from the analysis of views and

specific data alongside research literature to inform a wider review of policies and practice around the teaching of reading within the school, to explore the impact of motivation on reading.

The key research question being:

- *What are the benefits and limitations of being involved in a reading with dogs initiative for:*

- *Pupils*

- *Parents*

- *Practitioner*

Literature review

Rose (2006) identified issues with reading and the phonic statutory component of the literacy element of the national curriculum and engaged schools in developing a structured teaching programme of literacy prescribing content and delivery, leading to a rise in standards. Initially schools introduced a highly structured formal approach through the purchased of commercialised schemes and agreeably pupils make progress through these methods, but do they want to read and choose to do this independently?

Developing positive attitudes to literacy from the earliest stage is very important. Sainsbury and Schagen (2004) examined pupils' attitudes to reading at ages nine and eleven and reported favourably of no decline since the introduction of policy in 2003, and the introduction of more flexibility and creativity within literacy teaching. McKenna et al. (1995) and Sainsbury and Schagen (2004), Guthrie and Wigfield (1997); Baker and Wigfield, 1999

argue that learners who have a negative attitude towards reading are less likely to choose to read and this impacts upon their learning and progress, due to the difference in regularity and therefore their development of reading fluency. In contrast, Twist *et al.* (2007) discusses the central role of intrinsic motivation, further noting when children find reading enjoyable they are more likely to read more than those who do not enjoy reading. Reporting a more positive attitude to reading correlated with a higher reading assessment result. Further reinforced by questioning that it is not whether pupils can read but if they take part in reading regularly (Gorman *et al.*, 1981) and pupil motivated reading leads to opportunity which is equal to years of education. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000). However this is not reinforced by studies in other countries Twist *et al.* (2007).

The correlation between how well children read and how much they read, then leads to a positive relationship with reading (Gorman *et al.* (1981); Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000), and regular practice increases this. Therefore making reading enjoyable must be an underlying focus for teachers and parents. However, empirical evidence of practice shows there is a reliance on correcting, and teaching the decoding of print for fluency when reading to adults. For children to see themselves as effective readers they must see reading as enjoyable and not a place of negativity and failure, particularly vulnerable learners (OECD, 2002) and enjoyment impacts positively on reading attainment and social and emotional development (Twist *et al.*, 2007) in turn impacting upon engagement (Amsterlaw *et al.*, 2009). This leads one to conclude that developing a positive attitude to reading has a central importance alongside the acquisition of reading skills.

Establishing a positive attitude, emotional engagement and motivation is an element that can be lost through the use of structured programmes, within a return to rote teaching and the mechanics of drill and repetition. Practice within my own school highlights when children are still learning phonics they are taught in isolation due to the difficulties with timetable constraints leading to isolated teaching, notably without context the learning is

less effective. Is this only due to timetabling or is staff understanding and skills a factor and negative attitude established through this?

Evidence has shown the impact of structured phonic programmes, but requires this to be applied within a creative and motivating context, to develop positive attitudes to reading. Empirical evidence suggests a range of approaches used in the classroom involves adults leading the instruction of reading. Therefore within a structured day, are children given time and opportunity to choose to read? Children who can read and collaborate with peers independently can explore and find further information without relying on an adult. Adults may, without intention, lead and inhibit the pupils' attitudes to learning (Whitebread, 2012)

For children who are struggling, reconnecting with the pleasure of reading is very important. Jager-Adam (1990) insists the focus must be on developing both the code and meaning in parallel, but notes the role of adults to assist this process, instead of arguing which process should be used. Additionally, it is the aim to not just develop reading skills, but each child's potential, intellectually and productively through encouragement to read frequently, widely and thoughtfully.

DFE (2012) highlights research evidence on reading for pleasure and highlights strategies to improve independent reading, including having access to a wide choice of interesting books, rewards for reading, engaging parents as role models and relationships in the classroom and home. Use of the library is noted as a contributing factor, however one could question whether a parent who promotes the use of the library is also providing many other favourable factors such as spending significant time reading with and to their child, making this a difficult variable to distinguish. The report continues to suggest the decline in the numbers of children who read for pleasure, especially boys which in turn impacted on a decline in having positive attitudes to reading. Interestingly, a higher proportion of primary children saw themselves as readers, with the concept of a reader as happy child with lots of friends, compared to secondary and the concept of a reader as a "geeky nerd". This poses a

greater challenge on secondary teachers to support non-readers to become proficient and develop positive attitudes to reading, however in turn leading to a greater pressure for primary schools to highlight the risk posed to pupils who leave primary school without the skills to read independently without a positive attitude to read for pleasure.

Teachers need to reflect on practice within each classroom, and ensure they understand their role as researchers. Stenhouse (1975) states the requirement of the curriculum must be to create opportunity for such practice, where teachers use their practice to test and question research. Practitioner research emphasises education that is about posing questions, not just answering, questioning one's own practice and assumptions to make each classroom a place for inquiry to continually learn how to improve by collecting and analysing data.

Teachers employ many methods to increase the use of the reading area to develop reading for pleasure and a stimulus to support this. Studies in Japan showed long lasting beneficial effects during a small- scale study of the use of teddies as a motivator to read (Yoshihiro S. Okazaki et al, 2016). However there is no data on reading progress and further studies are required for further evaluation. Empirical evidence would suggest that within a school setting the effects are short and only showed effectiveness when linked to the context, however the evidence negates to show impact on pupils reading in the classroom and whether they show independent motivation to read continually for enjoyment.

It is possible that reading to a dog may motivate children to increase their frequency, enjoyment and opportunity for positive reading experiences. The use of dogs in classrooms is not new. In the 1990s Intermountain Therapy Animals announced a Reading Education Assistance Dogs (READ) programme leading to a growing number of initiatives internationally. Evidence suggests reading performance increases and contributes to a positive effect in the environment (Davidson, 2015), however evidence is of low quality. The number of systematic schemes in the UK is limited, and teachers will find a significant contribution to this body of knowledge from Hall et al (2016), who found only 48 relevant studies since 1933 evaluating the impact of reading dogs, deeming these of low quality.

Recently, Tufts University (2017) reported the improved literacy attitudes in children when reading aloud to dogs, noting the results suggest reading to dogs in school can provide motivation, and Lewis (2017) also concludes the benefits include communication skills, confidence, and attitudes towards learning of children who read regularly to dogs, noting specific benefits for children with additional needs.

Present research shows disengagement from, and negativity about reading was connected to formalised experiences in school (Davison, 2015), therefore having implications on the teaching of reading in schools. Could reading dogs have a positive impact on pupils showing difficulties and developing negative attitudes on reading?

Methodology

The aim of the small-scale study was to determine whether reading dogs affect attitudes to reading and attainment, leading to an impact upon pupil's independent choices in the classroom. The effect of the program was measured using a mixed method approach, to focus upon collecting, analysing and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data (Figure 1). This provides a better understanding of the research question than using one approach alone (Creswell, 2007). Data was collected from 10 Year 1 pupils within a primary school, which has 210 pupils on roll, including 11 who attend the part-time nursery class. The school has 9 classes, which include a nursery class, 2 mixed-age classes and 7 single-age classes. The school has 9 full-time and 2 part-time teachers.

Around 30% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, which is above the Welsh average. Less than 1% of pupils have English as an additional language. The school has identified

around 27% of pupils as having additional learning needs. One pupil has a statement of special educational needs. No pupils speak Welsh as their first language.

An application was made to the charity Burns By Your Side and following an introductory assembly for the whole school, a dog handler and their dog visited the school once a week over a term, being trained and monitored. Health and safety and insurances are also established and fully met by the organisation Burns By Your Side.

This is a mixed-method study, involving the following participants: the class teacher; the school's head teacher; the pupil participants and their parents.

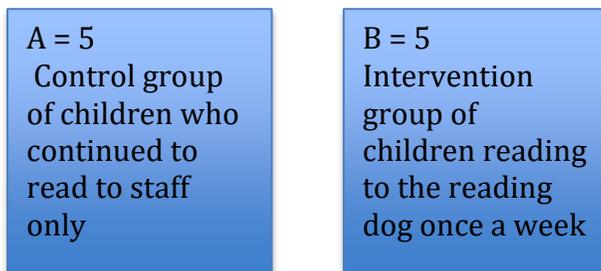
All participants will be interviewed (semi-structured) and will complete online questionnaires (via HWB FORMS) about their experiences during the initiative.

The class teacher will complete a diary of their experiences.

Pupil participants will undertake pre and post intervention testing (as part of normal school routine) in order to ascertain reading levels and views of themselves as learners.

Reading with dog sessions will be videotaped and analysed by the researcher.

Pupils were randomly selected based on low attainment of progress in reading from the same year and split into two groups, however the control group would completion of the study receive the intervention following Each session was held on the same afternoon each week for the same period of time.



Timed observations were made of the reading area during each day to monitor pupil's independent choice to read for pleasure. No changes were made to the area. All children's progress was examined using a variety of quantitative and qualitative measures:

Quantitative data:

- An anonymous and optional teacher questionnaire using questions regarding frequency and methods of reading with pupils, motivators used and their impact on pupils.
- Diagnostic Reading Accuracy and comprehension standardised assessments (DRA) were conducted at the start and end of the study period
- ‘Myself as a Learner’ (MALS) scale was used to assess attitudes to learning to measure pupils’ perception of their approaches to learning and abilities. An average score of 70 out of 100
- Pupil questionnaire using questions regarding views on reading and of themselves as learners pre and post initiative.

Qualitative data:

- Confidential, semi-structured, standardised interview for the purpose being to probe responses and investigate motives and feelings, using a combination of open and closed questions to gain further insight into perspectives.
- With consent, video recordings be made of the reading sessions
- Researcher diary to note observations of participants reading behaviours.

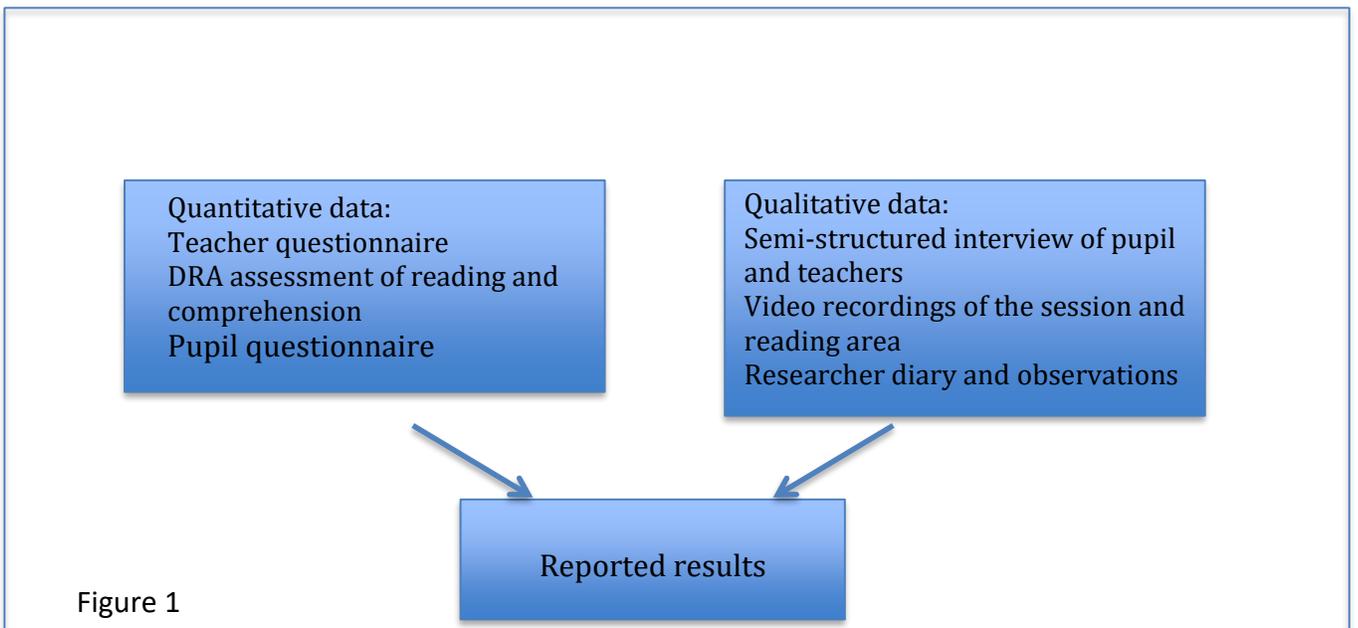
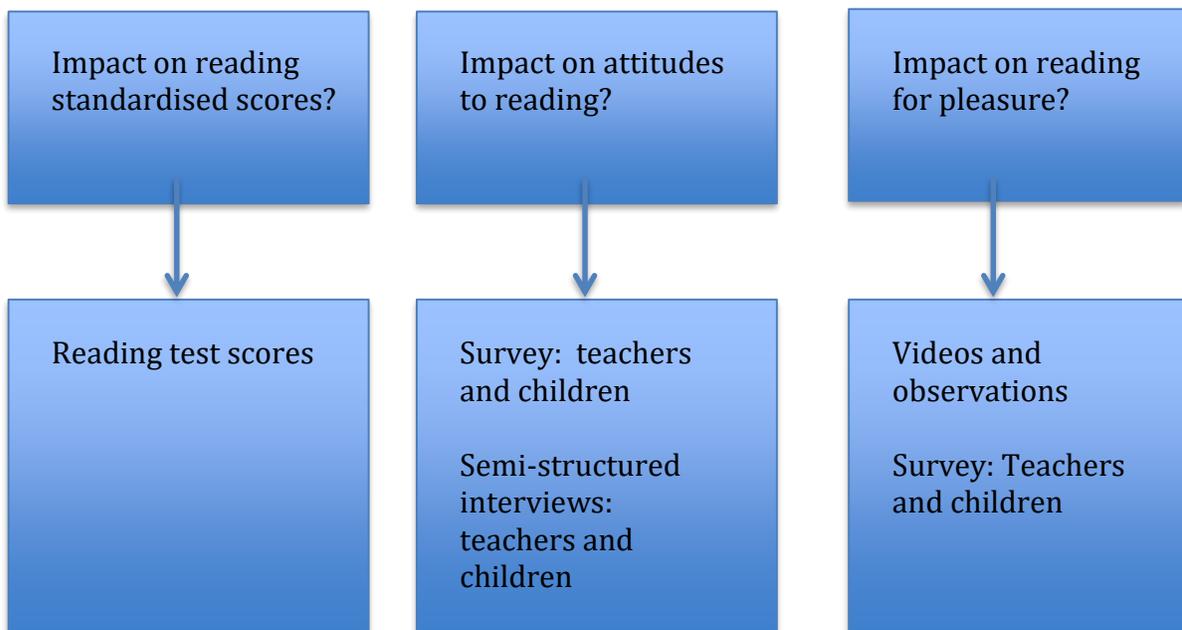


Figure 1

The purpose of this concurrent mixed method study (triangulation) is to better understand the impact of reading dogs on reading attainment, attitudes to read for pleasure by both converging both quantitative (numeric) and qualitative (text) data. In this approach the questionnaires and standardised assessments will be used to measure the relationship between the children and their reading. At the same time, attitudes to reading will be explored using semi-structured interviews, video recording to inform observations and researcher diary entries with children and teachers at the school. The use of triangulation demonstrates validity particularly in qualitative research by studying from more than one standpoint (Creswell, 2007)

Although there are disadvantages to these methods, this can impact upon researchers' choice of sample size to be less time-consuming, however the sample size for this study is limited due to the constrained time with the use of a reading dog. The use of mixed methods enables the weakness of quantitative research of not providing context and qualitative weakness of having bias and not providing information for statistical analysis. (Johnson et al, 2007)

Aims of the study are summarised below:



Ethical issues

All stages of the research followed the ethical guidance provided by BERA (2011) and involvement for all participants was voluntary.

All children within the classroom were aged less than 16 years old and therefore parental consent was required, however in addition, all children themselves also gave informed consent for the study. An information sheet and explanation was given and when consent was given a form was used to record the signature of each parent. All participants were clearly informed of their rights to withdraw from the study at any time, choose not to provide information and request to have their data removed from the study and destroyed. The researcher understands that the children may feel obligated to take part due to the nature of the relationships and will support the children to feel at ease.

With each questionnaire and interview the research was explained in child-friendly language allowing discussion to ensure opportunity was provided to understand the process.

To ensure confidentiality all children, teachers, handler and dog were allocated a letter in alphabetical order and all files were saved into a password-encrypted server and destroyed following analysis.

Analysis of results:

Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews

To determine the pupil's attitudes towards reading, questionnaires were discussed with the pupils to obtain their opinions and an interview to ensure questions were fully understood and enabled additional open questions to be discussed. Before the study the 10% of the children chose to read by themselves and no children from the intervention group reported positively about reading by themselves or felt happy about reading books.

Of the control group 20% felt happy about reading and chose to read independently. This shows two thirds of the children involved felt negative towards reading. Throughout the intervention pupils responded positively to each visit from the dog and gave consistent positive feedback. At the end of the study the control group showed no changes in their feelings towards reading but the intervention group showed a 100% improvement. During the semi-structured interviews the children involved in the intervention showed a difference in their feelings and provided greater detail such as:

Before the intervention	At the end of the study
'Reading is a bit hard'	'I can still be hard but (the dog) let's me try'
'Sometime I cry, sometimes I don't'	'I like reading to (the dog) and I don't cry now'
'I'm not bothered by reading'	'Reading is ok, it's kind of fun'
'I can't read it's hard'	'(The dog) likes listening to me read, I like stroking him'
I don't like reading much it's boring'	'I pick my new book for (the dog) and I get ready to read to him I want to do it forever, I read to my dog at home now'

There was an indication made by the intervention group that the reading dog didn't stop them all the time and let them read, one pupil noted that they can now read like the teacher and others listen.

Observations

No pupils of the intervention group chose to read independently prior to the study and 40% of the control group made the choice at least once within a week. Following the study 100% the intervention group chose to read between four and six times a week and the control group also improved to 80% between once and three times over a period of a week.

Test Scores

Analysis of the impact upon attitudes to reading MALS children within the intervention group made significantly more progress than the control group, of these attitudes there was a marked improvement on feeling good at reading, feeling confident, having difficult books, feeling less anxious and working things out when stuck.

All pupils show at least a 31% improvement within the intervention group compared to the control group of at least 9%. (Appendix H)

Reading measures at the start of the study showed 60% of pupils from both groups did not score and were significantly below average for accuracy, comprehension and rate.

Following the study 80% of the intervention group made progress with all areas and 60% made significant progress.

Of the control group 40% made progress with no children making significant progress and 20% continued to show no score. (Appendix I)

From the analysis of the diary and questionnaires the class teacher and cover teacher along with two support staff reported a positive response by all children to the reading dogs and the behaviour in the classroom has improved as a result. The practitioner noted a calmer environment where pupils remind each other how to care for each other like they do for the reading dog. Reading stamina has increased for pupils reading with the dog and increase use of the reading area to plan and prepare for their next session.

Analysis of individual pupil attendance over time and the home school reading records show an improvement in attendance and regularity of reading at home, including returning their book daily, with many children reading to their pet or teddy.

The intervention has also motivated independent use of the writing and creative area and pupils are writing letters, creating pictures and writing their own books to read during their session.

Socially children are discussing their sessions and working together on making items, with an improvement in confidence for all. A pupil with speech difficulties noted not being worried that his words didn't sound right and another pupil, who would hide from all structured tasks is showing greater enthusiasm and willingness to work with groups of children.

Conclusion

The role of the teacher in the classroom is seen as the primary motivator, despite the increasing use of technology and changes in the curriculum, however this role can have a negative effect on attitudes to reading through the intentions to teach and correct rather than listen. Research confirms that in the early years of Foundation Phase education, attitudes to reading and learning are formed. McKenna et al (1995). The more positive these experiences are the greater impact on developing children's positive attitudes will be. Reading to dogs support children to develop an increased positive attitude towards reading through the development of a relationship with the dog, receiving focused, non-judgemental attention when reading.

Experiencing positive emotions during reading enhances resiliency for future reading experiences and in turn developing a growth mindset towards reading. The greatest qualitative impact was seen in pupils with Additional Learning Needs.

The ability to reflect and recognise improvements on their own reading ability was strength of the study and supports the social and emotional aspects of learning, a crucial part of the curriculum adopted by the review (Donaldson, 2015). Thus showing the impacts is not just upon literacy, but aspects of wellbeing, with significant effect on children's attitudes towards reading and their independent choices to use the reading area and read during the week. Of course, this study has the limitations associated with small-scale study and must be noted. For example, the positive effects by the presence of a reading dog may be a novelty, and the effects may diminish over time, also the answers given by the children may be given to please the teacher. However, the information to date is overwhelmingly positive and each method has shown the impact on the intervention group and also upon the classroom environment.

It is important to recognise that dogs cannot teach children how to read, and the intention of the study and intervention has never been to suggest a replacement to the Foundation Phase literacy practices, but to determine the impact of an external motivator upon reading attainment, attitudes to reading and the children's choices to read for pleasure.

Although the dogs cannot respond verbally and show understanding towards the children, there is recognition of feeling heard and understood, a sense of feeling important. The questionnaire and diary entry responses by both teachers and both assistants note the range of books chosen by children and visits to the reading corner increased, to prepare for their next visit, children have shown greater concentration and focus between sessions, additionally parents have reported children asking to read and notably to read to their own pets. DFE (2012) note regular reading outside of school impact upon higher scores in reading assessments and this has a positive effect on attitudes to reading and reading for pleasure. It is essential that there is parental involvement on the best approaches to compliment school procedures.

Wigfield and Guthrie (2000) argue that although we can encourage reading, this is an external motivation. When investigating motivation, their findings concluded a direct correlation between the motivators and the amount and breadth of reading. Children who read more were more likely to continue to read more, whereas children who read less showed a lower likelihood to increase their reading patterns. Additionally, and importantly in terms of this study, the type of motivator seemed important. Children showing increased intrinsic motivation read more than children with lower levels, however when using external motivators the difference was lower.

A reading dog is an external motivator, and these early findings over a short time period show extraordinary positive effects on all aspects studied, however to determine if the external motivation can impact upon intrinsic motivation over time is for further investigation. Initial findings show progress of attitudes, attainment and therefore regularity of reading, thus leading to a prediction where children will develop a greater intrinsic motivation as they gain confidence and a greater use of reading for pleasure. Studies show that pupils who read more become better readers, greater attainment may lead to greater enjoyment or vice versa (DFE, 2012), additionally Clark (2011) found children who reported that they enjoyed reading were six times more likely to read above their level for their age than those who do not enjoy reading, who were eleven times more likely to be below their expected level for their age, an important way to help prevent social exclusion. Determining why children read could be a factor in understanding motivation and therefore supporting the development within the classroom. DFE (2012) report children include wanting to read to learn and to make them feel good, an area for schools to consider when determining ways to promote standards of reading.

When discussing motivators, research on reading for pleasure noted the use of digital media, this cannot be dismissed and leads to questions of their use in every classroom. All classrooms have an array of digital devices for children and integrate these into the everyday

learning of the classroom. Therefore would the use of a digital device be an external motivator for reading and could these offer adaptive technologies to support pupils with additional needs whilst reading independently to a reading dog? This could present as an area for further research and development, requiring parental engagement to alleviate concerns and support safe home use.

It is evident that this study has shown the need to ensure the development of enjoyment of reading, reinforced by OECD (2002) findings as a greater determining factor for educational success than socio-economic status. Within a short time reading for dogs has shown favourable impact upon the intervention group and further investigation will determine if this can also impact on developing an inner motivation and pleasure of reading. Furthermore, the intervention can only target a small group of learners over a period of time and it will need to be determined the period of intervention to cause longer-term positive impact. Additionally, one would need to measure whether the gains made during the regular sessions with the reading dog are sustained into independent reading when the intervention ceases.

Reflection

Carrying out a research study within my classroom has had a considerable impact on my practice, my class and additionally the whole school through wider collaboration and encouraging other staff to participate in class based research.

Having the research grant enabled me to dedicate specific time and resources to my area of study, which was invaluable during this period of monetary restrictions. The links made with a university professor with a particular interest in animal based practices will continue and we will be carrying out further research together. Additionally we have decided to work with Burn By Your Side to train a reading assistance dog to become the schools permanent dog through a staff volunteer.

Next steps

- To disseminate the findings with all staff and invite all practitioners and governors to observe the sessions.
- Discuss the initial study findings to identify pupils who would benefit from the interventions.
- Consider video or audio record sessions for the children to listen to their own reading to develop self-correction methods, ensuring ethical guidelines are followed.
- Continue to link with a University professor to undertake further research into the impact of dogs in the classroom. Compare the use of an additional reading motivator such as ICT.
- Liaise with the organisation providing the reading dogs to develop a long term plan to consider a permanent school reading dog.
- Link with parents and carers to share strategies to support home reading.
- Share the research and findings with others through conferences and visits.

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Dissemination

- Workshop in the International Thinking Skills conference Swindon
- Workshop in 'Child Matters' conference Aberystwyth
- Poster at BERA event in Cardiff
- Link with Local Authority advisory team to share at conferences across the region