"The Dog Project:" Implications For Instruction

Joanne Marie Robertson

ABSTRACT

In this photo essay, I examine the social contexts of literacy development through an exploration of a unique organization called "The Dog Project." In this descriptive narrative, I document the ways children's interactions with their peers, the instructors, and the dogs in the project fostered their sense of self-efficacy, their sustained engagement with texts, and their motivation to read and write. I draw implications for the establishment of kind, empathetic, and familiar learning environments in the early years of instruction.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Joanne Robertson is an Assistant Professor in the Literacy Department, Graduate School of Education, at St. John's University. She teaches the *Language Acquisition and Emergent Literacy* and *Teaching Literacy through Literature* courses. Dr. Robertson's research agenda over the last several years has revolved around the concept of optimal learning environments for all children.

AUTHOR' NOTE

Photographs are taken by Richard Atkins, doctoral candidate, St. John's University.

Brooke sits on top of his favorite book.

Introduction

Contemporary learning theory supports the notion that literacy development occurs within sociocultural, dialogic, and participatory frameworks that support and extend apprentice learners' initiatives (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). We understand that all learning is "situated" (Lave & Wenger,

1991), or context-specific, and that it is inherently social in nature. We know that motivation facilitates children's engagement with literacy tasks (Mathewson, 1994), and students' perceptions of "self-efficacy" (Bandura, 1997). We acknowledge the critical role of the teacher in creating a context that facilitates these "can do" attitudes (McCabe, 2003) through social interaction, positive feedback, and challenging opportunities that promote critical literacy development (Comber, 2001).[1] We realize that teaching and learning are all about relationships. McDermott (cited in Murphy, 1999) writes, "Learning does not belong to individual persons, but to the various conversations of which they are a part" (p. 17). The following photo-essay represents my conversations, understandings, and reflections about the ways dogs can motivate children to read, and show their teachers how to foster positive attitudes towards reading and writing in their classrooms.

Beginnings

I heard about "The Dog Project" through a friend.[2] I was eager to visit this extraordinary site for I am passionate about dogs and keenly interested in learning about environments that facilitate children's literacy development. I make an appointment to speak with Robert Berens, who conceptualized and brought to fruition the Project. Later, I will observe a read-aloud with the children and the dogs.

"Don't you wish we had this when we were growing up?" Berens asks. I nod in agreement. The Dog Project is his brainchild, but he immediately clarifies that it is not an original idea. Inspired by an article he read in a newspaper about an innovative program using therapy dogs to help children with "reading problems," [3] Berens envisioned ways to extend the concept to the general student population. Through participation in project activities, he hopes to promote the humane care and treatment of "people, animals, and the planet." Using dogs to motivate children to read appears to be a growing phenomenon.[4]

"The teachers helped us," Berens tells me. In the beginning, ten schools agreed to participate in the project. "They suggested books that would be appropriate," he continues. As I review the literature selections, it is obvious that careful attention has been paid to creating a library with broad appeal across grade levels. "We thought we'd bring in one child at a time to read to the dogs," he says. "Then, the teachers told us that kids like observing other kids reading and that five or six children in a multiage group would be better." Berens also talks about the ways The Dog Project has extended the established curriculum for many of the teachers. One teacher, he shares, used her trip to the Project as a "hands-on culminating activity" for her literature unit on *Shiloh.*

Welcome to "The Dog Project!"

[1] Critical literacy is defined by Comber as "people using language to exercise power, to enhance everyday life in schools and communities, and to question practices of privilege and injustice" (p. 1).

[2] The Dog Project is "an all volunteer, private, and non-profit organization of humans and dogs, supported by tax deductible contributions," located on the Sands Point Preserve on Long Island, New York. Robert Berens, its founder, writes "The purpose of The Dog Project is for people and dogs to share good times and help each other reach our goal of having only as many dogs as there are good homes for them." He consented to the publication of this article, and can be reached at www.dogproject.org.

[3] Information about "Dog Day Afternoons," a program using therapy dogs established by Sandi Martin in Salt Lake City Utah, can be retrieved from http://www.therapyanimals.org/read/ose_03252000.html.

[4] Information about "The Paws that Remediate," a program in the Martin County (Florida) Library System intended to boost the literacy skills and confidence of struggling young readers using therapy dogs, can be located in *American Libraries*, August 2001, Vol. 32 (7). Information about "See Spot Read" a program developed for public libraries using therapy dogs can be located in *Public Libraries*, Nov-Dec 2002, Vol. 41 (6).

I am met at the front door by a boisterous sable collie named "Timmy," with gloriously long eye lashes. He's holding a fuzzy toy in his mouth, which he playfully shakes back and forth as if in greeting. Though happy to see me, he is clearly anticipating someone else. He sits by the door waiting for them. A second collie, "Brooke," is more reserved. After allowing me to stroke his head, he heads into the adjoining reading room. Once inside "The Project," I notice the attention paid to every detail of the facility. The entry room serves as a reception area, in which the children can browse through the materials and learn about pet care. I am given a colorful dog bone and paw print name tag. I write "Joanne" on it, and begin to introduce myself to the volunteers at the project. One of them is wearing *101 Dalmatians* earrings.

Timmy lets me borrow his award for this publication.

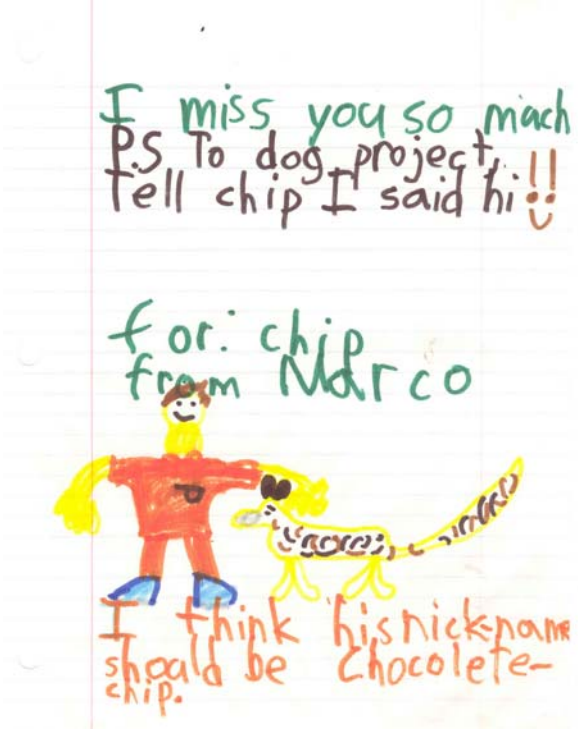
To Timmy's delight the school buses finally arrive, and the children bound gleefully into The Project. The director gives them a brief overview of the morning's activities. Afterwards, he reads a picture book and engages them in a conversation about the "Golden Rule." The children discuss "treating people the way they want to be treated." An atmosphere of respect is established early on, especially regarding the dogs. Afterwards, the children are dispersed to different locations on the nature preserve. Some visit the museum to learn about the artifacts displayed there, others take a nature walk on the beach with an obliging golden retriever, while the last group of students read to the dogs. The youngsters

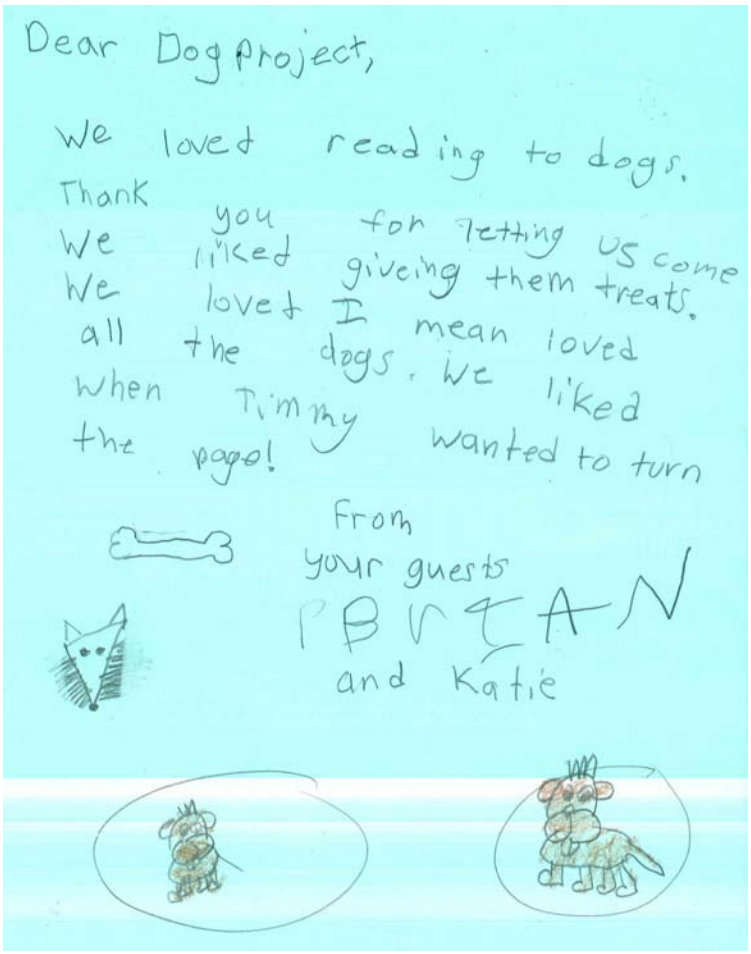
alternate between these activities until everyone has had a turn to be with the dogs. They finish the visit with a picnic lunch.

I choose to join the readers. When I enter the "reading" room, I notice the comprehensive library of books that have been donated to the project by benefactors. I recognize some favorite titles, like *Clifford* and the *McDuff* stories, but see others that I am not familiar with, like the *Dogtionary*. I find dog and cat picture books, alphabet books, pop-up books, and informational texts. It is a lovely selection of non-leveled, high-interest texts that are thematically arranged. Even the oversized pillows the children sit upon are shaped like dog bones. The children are delighted with everything they see in the room. I hear *Who Let the Dogs Out?* playing softly in the background.

Unconditional Support

The children sprawl out upon overstuffed cushions on the floor. Grouped in twos and threes, they are eager to read to the dogs. The owner of the collies, Janet, gives them biscuits and instructions for the read aloud. "After you read three pages you may give the dogs *one* biscuit," she tells them. Janet whispers to me, "I think the dogs have learned to count! After three pages they start to paw the children for their treat." Indeed, this seems to be the case. The collies appear to have adjusted to the routine, and to the children. They make no demands upon them (except for biscuits), accept all overtures of companionship, and seem content to sit, listen, and be petted. The children are motivated to read, and are eager to select a story they believe the dogs will like. I watch as they review the books in the "dog library," scanning the illustrations and texts, until they find one that strikes their fancy. I notice how they mimic the story telling techniques of their teachers, holding the books up for the dogs to see, and pointing to particular aspects of the pictures. They strive to make the dogs attend to the story. They take turns reading, helping each other with unknown words. They paraphrase parts they can't read. They explain the pictures to the dogs. No one tells them to do these things.





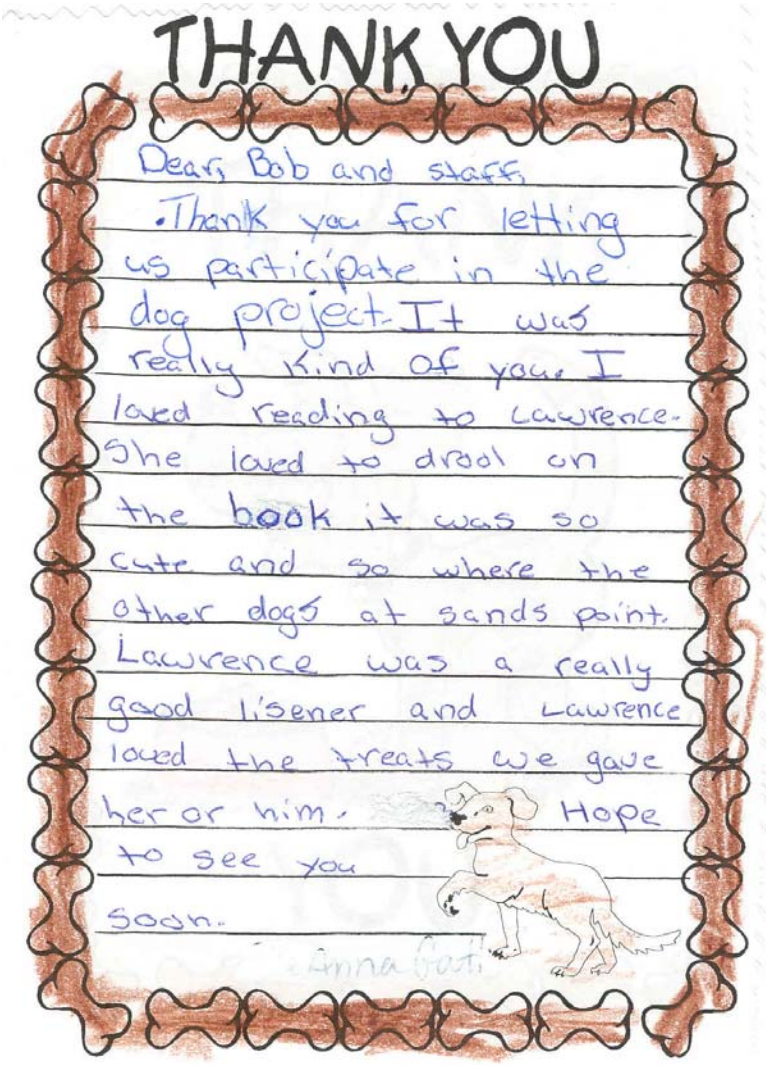
The children "love, I mean love" the dogs, as demonstrated in this illustrated letter. They refer to themselves as "guests," reflecting their sense of The Dog Project as a home.

It also appears that the dogs want to please the children. The volunteers explain that they are all "rescue dogs," adopted from organizations that specialize in their breeds. One dog is classified as a "therapy" dog, and I'm told she regularly visits residents in a local nursing home. None of the dogs leave their places unless directed to do so by their owners. They take turns being read to, or run on the beach with the children.

Empathy and Respect

One child, Olivia, is fearful. The size of the collies intimidates her. She asks if she can sit on a chair so as to have the height advantage. She says she does not want to read to the dogs. Her wishes are respected. Her teacher tells me she's usually "quiet." She is given a dog biscuit. But gradually, the black and white collie, Brooke, wins her over. First, she tosses him a biscuit. Soon after, she delicately slides off the chair and moves toward the cushion in the floor. She asks to touch Brooke's fur, and sits down to listen to the story. I notice that the collie appears to be attending more to the story, and the little girl is using him as an armrest. Janet, his owner, tells me that Brooke is particularly sensitive and empathetic to the children's needs. "We had one child who was deaf and blind who came to visit," she shares. "Do you

know that he [Brooke] walked her all the way back to the school bus when it was time to leave? She was crying and didn't want to leave. They got her on the bus because of Brooke. He didn't leave her side."



Children's Understandings

A fourth grader is reading Cynthia Rylant's "Dog Heaven" to Timmy and his friend. "I'll read, and then you'll read," they say. They begin to relate the story to their own lives. "Long, long ago my grandma had two dogs," he says. "But they went away." He strokes Timmy's head as he speaks. "I think he understands," says his classmate. They decide to give him an extra biscuit. I notice that Brooke has fallen asleep on his pillow next to the little girl, but the group is still reading. It would appear, that the dogs have now become ancillary to the reading event.

Timmy poses for the camera.

"You stay and listen," the fourth grader tells Timmy. He is reading *Spot's Big Lift-the-Flap Book*. "Do you think he is really listening?" another child asks. "No," he replies, but continues reading. "He doesn't like this book," a kindergarten child tells him. This group is composed of older and younger children. They put the book aside. "You have to read to feed," reminds the volunteer. "Let's try something funny," the older boy suggests. They decide to read *Go Dog Go!* They read some, stop some, pet some, and feed some of the biscuit to Timmy. "I believe he's paying attention now," the kindergartener says. "Well, he's certainly looking more," the fourth grader states. After a few pages, the kindergarten builds up her courage to read a page by herself. I notice her "miscues." She reads "dig" for "big," but looks at the pictures and corrects herself. When she is unsure of a word, the older children help her sound it out. Could it be that this homelike, multi-age environment facilitates engagement with literature and self-directed learning?

Implications for Instruction

Our students can be our teachers, if we allow them to. As I review the stacks of letters and pictures Robert Berens shares with me, I gain insights into the children's perceptions of their experiences and participation in The Dog Project.

> "We loved the dogs. They were sweet and kind to us," Natalia and Sarah write. "I liked reading *Go Dog Go*," Jonathan prints in big letters across the page.
> "Thank you for teaching us how to treat humans and animals the way we would like to be treated," Maria and Sandra scribe.
> "My class and I learned so much about friendship and dogs," Kelly writes.

The children's letters resound with a common theme, best articulated by Ashley and Lauren, "We liked reading to the dogs. We had a blast with you guys!"

If a learning environment is free of censure and disapproval, and if children are respected as competent, responsible, and independent readers, they can and will direct their own learning. I think back to my own childhood experiences, and remember reading aloud to my dolls. No one had to motivate or convince me that this was important. It seemed natural, or what we now describe as an authentic or "real world" literacy task. I felt that I was a good reader, and that my dolls were enjoying the stories. This experience is no different for the children who read to the dogs at The Dog Project. They feel that the dogs value their attention.

We should note that the dogs take their cues from the children. They are nondirective. They don't care if the little ones read the books upside down. They listen. They enjoy their company. Good teachers do the same.

Brooke takes a little break, but the reading continues!

I spend two hours at "The Dog Project," oblivious to time. I have enjoyed myself. The children have enjoyed themselves. So, what does this all mean for teaching and learning? As I look through my field notes, I see a note scrawled in bold letters across the top of the last page. "The key is kindness," it says. "Kindness!" The Dog Project is a kind and caring place for the children and the animals. The volunteers love their work, and I believe that the dogs do too. "They know what they're here for," one of the volunteers says. "They don't do it for the treats." In reality, none of us do.

Laurie and Timmy listening to stories.

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