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Pets in the Classroom: The Difference They Can Make

Abstract

This review observes the potential effects on students by having pets in the classroom. The author considers the effects of pets in the everyday classroom setting and through Animal Assisted Therapy Programs. It discusses what can be learned from an animal and concerns that may arise by exposing students to various animals. This review contrasts the many types of animals that may be found in the classroom to select the appropriate pet for the given environment. Twelve individuals participated in a survey to share their opinions of pets in the classroom. All participants stated that pets were in fact appropriate in the classroom, however, only two participants have pets in their classroom. This review challenges teachers to compare the potential benefits and concerns of having a pet in the classroom. It encourages teachers to carefully consider adding a classroom pet to each classroom.

Document Type

Thesis

Degree Name

MS in Special Education

Department

Education

Subject Categories

Education

Running Head: PETS IN THE CLASSROOM

Pets in the Classroom
The Difference They Can Make

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
M.S. Special Education

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April 2012

Abstract

This review observes the potential effects on students by having pets in the classroom. The author considers the effects of pets in the everyday classroom setting and through Animal Assisted Therapy Programs. It discusses what can be learned from an animal and concerns that may arise by exposing students to various animals. This review contrasts the many types of animals that may be found in the classroom to select the appropriate pet for the given environment. Twelve individuals participated in a survey to share their opinions of pets in the classroom. All participants stated that pets were in fact appropriate in the classroom, however, only two participants have pets in their classroom. This review challenges teachers to compare the potential benefits and concerns of having a pet in the classroom. It encourages teachers to carefully consider adding a classroom pet to each classroom.

Pets in the Classroom: The Difference They Can Make

When people look back at their childhood memories of pets in the classroom, are they thinking of the impact that those pets had on their learning process? The purpose of this research is to find correlation between pets in a classroom setting and the impact that it has on the students learning and the classroom environment. The reviewed literature is focused on the potential benefits and concerns of bringing a pet into the classroom. It also looks at alternatives or additions to having pets and the classroom in bringing pet therapy programs into action. The author's purpose is to educate individuals on the affects that pets can have on students and the various ways in which to implement pets appropriately into the classroom.

Benefits of Having Pets in the Classroom

A classroom is a community of learners. What better way to bring a community of learners together, than to take care of something. Having a classroom pet requires the classroom to care for one specific thing. They must work together to care for the pet, take responsibility and communicate with one another to accomplish tasks or discuss concerns about the pet creating positive relationships (Meadan & Jegatheesan, 2010).

Students will naturally build relationships in this community of learners, but for some children this is not as easy. Animals establish a companionship if not because they demand care, but they create a nonjudgmental environment for students to talk to their pets about their many feelings (Meadan & Jegatheesan, 2010). This type of conversation can be beneficial in many situations including students who are feeling angry and need time away to calm, students that are shy and struggle communicating with friends and teachers, a child who is feeling lonely and is in need of someone to talk to, or a child who has a speech disorder and wants to talk to someone without concern for correction or judgment.

Students get a sense of understanding of the needs of others in their relationship with pets. They may wonder why the classroom gerbil is not coming over to the side of the cage like he typically does. They can discuss with one another and ask questions to check if the gerbil is okay. By responding to these needs and questioning they are making connections with the animal and building an understanding of communications of needs. They also can practice appropriate protocol of interaction, taking turns, being kind and gentle, appropriate behaviors in different situations like feeding time or letting an animal rest when needing rest (Meadan & Jegatheesan, 2010; Brous, 2010).

Students learn to read the needs of the animals in their posture, reactions, and absence of typical response. In caring for the pet and discovering the pet's needs the students are taking initiative to satisfy the pet. This encourages self-reliance as well as self-confidence. These skills can be passed on to behaviors not only with other animals, but with people (Brous, 2010).

Social interaction is important in so many ways. Working with pets as stated builds positive relationships, communication skills, and self-confidence all of which are improving social skills. They have found that even eye contact and spontaneous conversation can improve while working with animals. There is a motivation to working with animals and children are likely to respond well. This includes some children that may have difficulty speaking, it motivates them to express their feelings and concerns and needs to the pet or teacher to represent the desire to help or work with the pet (Stone, 2010).

Students can show and receive affection from pets relating to feelings of others and taking on perspectives of another as well. They can rehearse multiple directions and skills in taking on responsibilities of the pets (Stone, 2010). By taking on responsibility of caring for the pet the student gains a sense of control and self-confidence. Often times children are not given

the option to make choices or are not trusted to do something correctly. By giving the child the proper instruction and rehearsing appropriate interactions with pets the child is confident in their role as caretaker. Some students will need assistance and jobs may be altered depending on the pet, but by giving a child responsibility over another living thing is showing them that they are trusted. When a child feels confident enough to take care of another living being they have the opportunity for the confidence to take care of his or herself (Brous, 2010).

The child is learning how to care for something so fragile practicing self-monitoring skills to be sure that they are not hurting the animal. I have seen in my own classroom of two year olds the sense of community and self-control in taking care of our classroom fish Butterfly and Mermaid. The children remind each other not to touch the fish tank or to tap on it. They are not only taking responsibility for themselves, but also for the other students in the classroom.

Animals can have a calming effect on a child. Sometimes just watching the pet is enough to relax even the most excitable child (Burch, 2003; Ross 2005). By taking children away from other stimuli and bringing them to a pet you can bring the child back into a working state of mind after multiple emotions are displayed such as anger, sadness, or distracting excitement.

Classroom pets can be brought into the curriculum in many ways to make connections to learning in a fun and motivating way. Concepts can be taught by using the relationships and interest that students have with the pets. For example, discuss the differences, similarities, and diversity of different pets and people. This can also bring up the discussion of diversity, different needs of different beings, and acceptance (Meadan & Jegatheesan).

Pets in the classroom can benefit all learners in the community including students with disabilities. Some students will have programs set up for them in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) but sometimes a simple interaction with the classroom pet can have a significant

impact on the student. It has been found that students with sensory issues at times can overcome their concerns with time and desire to participate in working with pets. This includes touching the pets, brushing the pets, and feeding the pets (Brous, 2010; Stone, 2010). Pets also can give the students motivation and comfort to push through physical barriers to do unwanted exercises or movements. Give students the motivation and acceptance to participate in activities, use language skills, and become a leader or teacher when working with the animal (Brous, 2010).

Potential Concerns for Pets in the Classroom

Owens and Williams suggest, “Before incorporating any pet into the classroom, you’ll have to give consideration to Children’s allergies, caregiving over school holidays and pet’s unexpected pregnancies” (Owens & Williams, 1995, p. 50). It is important that the teacher understands what kind of responsibility they are taking on by having a classroom pet. On the Humane Society website there is a specific page for those considering classroom pets. It asks teachers to ask themselves if they are ready to become a humane role model.

To be a humane role model you must (1) consistently provide all the care the pet needs, (2) establish a classroom code of humane treatment, and (3) remain vigilant in detecting and preventing students’ over handling, mistreatment, or theft of the animal. (Humane Society, 2011)

By being the responsible caretaker and not sending the pet home with students avoid a lot of unwanted outcomes can be avoided. This includes potential unwanted pregnancy when the pet is exposed to other animals, loss of pet both by misplacement and by death, and complaints from parents.

Teachers also need to consider allergies in the classroom. It is first priority of teachers to keep their students safe in the classroom setting. In selecting an animal they must know their

students and their allergies. For younger classes especially it may be necessary to send notes home to parents to ask them about potential allergies or their thoughts on having a classroom pet (Meadan & Jegatheesan, 2010).

Some pets such as hamsters are nocturnal pets and will sleep all day and be alert at night. (Humane Society, 2011). So unless you are looking for a pet to watch that is less distracting this may not be the best pet for your classroom. Animals that bite are another thing to consider. Habitats can be created that will avoid a potential bite, but curious fingers can always work their way in. Consider the procedures that will need to be taken if a bite or sting does happen in the classroom. Supervise the interaction between students and animals and pay attention to proximity of teacher, the animal and students (Meadan & Jegatheesan, 2010).

Animals also can become escape artists. It may be a distracting day when Sally the Snake escapes her tank and is missing somewhere in the classroom. This is also alarming when thinking about a scared and hungry animal, and what could happen when a child finds that animal. When selecting a pet for the classroom research and choose with thought. If you choose to select a pet that may cause disease or potential harm you must educate and prepare yourself and the students for such exposure (Meadan & Jegatheesan, 2010).

Selecting the Appropriate Classroom Pet for You

It is important to consider the type of pet for your classroom. You must first consider the rules of your school district and specific building policies (Meadan & Jegatheesan, 2010). If pets are allowed be sure to see that there are no restrictions on pet types. Discuss with your students and parents any allergy concerns that they may have in selecting a pet. Think about the age level of your students and type of environment in your classroom. Meadan and Jegatheesan state, “Children under the age of 5 should not come in contact with reptiles, amphibians, baby chicks,

or ducklings” (Meadan & Jegatheesan, 2010, p. 71). Also consider pets that may carry Salmonella such as any type of reptile including turtles and even the common classroom pet hamsters (The Humane Society, 2011). Salmonella can be transferred to humans even when physical contact is not met (The Humane Society, 2011).

Exotic or wild animals should not be kept as pets in the classroom. This includes animals that you find on nature walks and those that can be found in pet stores such as chinchillas, frogs, lizards, hedgehogs, snakes, and turtles (The Humane Society, 2011). Having these types of animals not only poses issues for the unnatural habitat of the animal, lack of education for proper care in meeting the needs of the pet, but also it can encourage children to take on these animals as their own pets when found in the wild (The Humane Society, 2011).

In addition to potentially carrying Salmonella, hamsters are nocturnal and typically sleep during the day and are awake during the night. Children may have the desire to disturb the animal during sleep or find themselves disinterested due to lack of activity during the day (The Humane Society, 2011). If you are going to have a hamster in the classroom you need to be sure that you give them the proper habitat and are prepared for potential background noise. Hamsters need lots of exercise. Although they appear comfortable in small cages they need room to move around. Solutions can be found at local pet stores with hamster wheels and tunnels and tubes. The hamster can also be placed in hamster balls where they are safe from potential contaminants, but prepare your students to remain calm and out of the way if the hamster is out during the day to avoid losing the ball or kicking and bumping the ball. Stay aware of where the hamster is at all time, the hamster ball could break open or waste could be left on the floor and will need to be cleaned properly if the animal has a bowel movement during exercise.

Rabbits are also considered a typical classroom pet, however because they are prey they naturally are alarmed by loud noises (The Humane Society, 2011). “Rabbits are crepuscular, meaning they’re active at dawn and dusk and sleep during the day and night” (The Humane Society, 2011). In thinking of classroom hours the rabbit will be alert during the morning hours and sleep during the rest of the day and not become active until after the students have left for the day. Birds are also a pet that may be best kept at home. They can be a noisy animal and are sensitive to drafts and changes in temperature (The Humane Society, 2011).

Ask yourself if you are willing to take on a high maintenance pet or if you are looking for something that can be left over the weekend and cleaned as needed. Hermit crabs, fish and insects are a good alternative pet for children with allergies. (The Humane Society , 2011; Meadan & Jegatheesan). Fish are a pet that works well in the classroom (Humane Society, 2011). A small tank with Goldfish or Beta fish would have little maintenance. If students have allergies or are not ready to handle pets fish are the best choice for your classroom. Fish are often used as a calming mechanism to decrease anxiety this is why in most waiting rooms of doctor’s offices you will find a fish tank (Pichot & Coulter, 2007).

The best pets for the classroom are specific small rodents such as rats, gerbils, and guinea pigs. They are less likely to carry diseases that may be passed on to humans. These are fairly social pets and may be happiest housed with a companion. Please consider the sex of the animals when selecting the companion to avoid unwanted breeding, two females would be the best choice (Humane Society, 2011).



Figure 1 (Meadan & Jegatheesan, 2010, p. 71)

Pet Safety in the Classroom

Be prepared for new materials in your classroom if students are creating environments for the animals and will be handling materials or specimens that require Personal Protective Equipment. In an activity done called the Critter Project using invertebrates they prepared students by giving them the proper tools to ensure the safety of the students and critters.

We provided students with live and preserved invertebrate specimens to examine.

Students wore nonlatex gloves and washed hands with soap and water before and after handling live specimens. We kept Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) on hand for preservatives, wore chemical splash goggles and nonlatex gloves, ensured appropriate

ventilation, and washed hands with soap and water when handling preserved specimens.

(Eidietis, Gray, Riggs, West, & Coffman, 2007, p. 38)

Depending on the types of animals and habitats you will need to research as the teacher to know what is safe for the children. By using Material Safety Data Sheets and protective equipment you are exposing your students to scientific tools and teaching them the importance of safety. This should also be considered when working with animals that may potentially sting or bite the students (Eidietis, Gray, Riggs, West, & Coffman, 2007).

Pets in the Curriculum

The Critter Project not only reduced “critter jitters” “but these invertebrates can help teachers meet science standards, promote inquiry and demonstrate the processes of science” (Eidietis, Gray, Riggs, West, & Coffman, 2007, p. 37). Thinking of inquiry opens doors for questions, projects, self-motivated lessons by the students. If interest arises the teachers can have unlimited opportunities for learning for these students. Bringing science into the classroom in unique ways like the Critter Project is an example of how pets in the classroom can benefit the learning process. As this is more focused on science, specimens and habitats, this brings students an opportunity for interest, motivation and desire to use safe and healthy habits to make such learning possible. It has been found that the instructional use of animals correlates with positive attitudes towards science (Fonseca, Franco, Brosseron, Tavares, Olsson, & Borlido-Santos, 2011).

Service learning projects are a great way to bring animals into the curriculum. Students have already formed a bond with their classroom pet and now can use that bond to make connections to other pets that may need their help. Students can arrange activities for awareness in rescuing animals. They can learn about hazardous materials and clean up the local habitats to

make it a safer place for animals to live. They can also build birdhouses or other shelters for animals if not partake in planning for such materials (Humane Society, 2011).

There are many books about animals that can be brought into lessons. Students can also write about their experiences in pet journals or write stories about the classroom pets. Students can read stories to the pet during reading or free time if chosen to be appropriate by the teacher (Meadan & Jegatheesan, 2010).

Teachers can make connections in math with the animals. They can research about the types of animals and population of those animals. They can do economic lessons and research cost to take care of the animal and shop for the items needed to meet the needs of the animal. They can also use the animals in different math manipulation problems increasing interest and making connections in the learning process. Entire unit plans can be created based upon the classroom animals or other animals that teacher or student may choose (Owens & Williams, 1995).

Animal-Assisted Therapy in Action

When people think about pet therapy they typically think about dogs that come into the classroom to be reading buddies with the students. Pet therapy is also commonly seen in elderly care or with people with medical concerns that dogs are trained to help pupils detect potential episodes or medical needs, or assisting them with physical needs. These pets go through a screening process and are carefully placed with their appropriate partner, age group, or job (Pichot & Coulter, 2007).

The majority of research found on pet therapy was in using dogs for therapy. Not only do many people enjoy dogs, but the majority of dogs can be trained to do many tasks and respond to cues. Dogs are less likely to become sick or injured when working in a therapy setting than

smaller pets. Depending on the size and breed of the therapy dog they are able to complete larger tasks for their client. Dogs are sociable animals and can be playful and affectionate with their clients encouraging sociability and connections. As there are many advantages of using dogs there are also disadvantages.

There are all types of pets that can be used for pet therapy. In *Wanted! Animal Volunteers* by Mary R. Burch she focused on dogs, horses, cats, farm animals and small or less common animals such as llamas, rabbits, birds, gerbils, hamsters, fish, and guinea pigs (Burch, 2003).

Skills to be learned from a therapy dog (Burch, 2003, pp. 34-35)**Cognitive/Knowledge**

- Dog Breeds
- Information pertaining to care
- Reaching about dogs from a book or magazine

Gross motor (big muscles—arms and legs)

- Walking the dog
- Throwing a ball for the dog
- Running with the dog

Fine motor (hands)

- Petting the dog (open fingers)
- Brushing or combing the dog
- Simple grooming tasks
- Holding a leash (for physically impaired clients)
- Filling water dish
- Pouring food
- Feeding the dog a treat (handler decides if appropriate)

Speech/Communication

- Giving commands (saying words such as “sit” or “heel”)
- Client telling about dogs owned in past
- Socialization with others (“tell Mr. B the story you told me about the dog you had”)
- Imitating/giving hand signals (nonverbal communication)
- Describing how dogs make you feel
- Writing or dictating a story about the therapy dog

Daily Living

- Routine care, showing up on time to care for the dog
- Making a purchase for the dog (small treat or toy)
- Feeding the dog a treat (handler decides if appropriate)

Burch discusses a particular case about a three year old boy that was prenatally exposed to cocaine. He was unable to walk, only crawl and with the help of a Border Collie named Laddie and a 10 step walking program he was able to learn how to walk (Burch, 2003).

Cats are sometimes preferred over dogs because they can be a bit calmer and easier to please depending on the individual personality. Cats are enjoyable to watch as they play and other times can be affectionate or provide companionship by resting on a lap. They are easier to groom than dogs, but cannot perform the many skills that a dog can. Some clients may be highly allergic to cats so this type of animal may not be the best fit for them (Burch, 2003).

Skills to be learned from a therapy cat (Burch, 2003):**Cognitive/Knowledge**

- Breed of cats, recalling information
- Information pertaining to cat care

- Reading about cats from books or magazines
- Recalling stories about cats

Gross Motor (big muscles—arms and legs)

- Walking with cats who like to go for walks on harnesses/leashes
- Reaching out arms to take the cat in lap
- Throwing a toy to the cat
- Swinging arms while dangling cat toy

Fine motor (hands)

- Brushing/combing cat
- Petting cat (open fingers) for improving mobility and tactile stimulation
- Holding leash, helping with harness
- Filling water dish
- Pouring food (if appropriate)
- Feeding treat (handler preference and facility permission)
- Holding toys and moving toys to play with cat

Speech/communication

- Talking to cat telling about cats owned
- Describing thoughts/feelings related to therapy cats
- Writing or dictating a story about cats
- Socialization—telling another person about the cat or using pictures

Daily living

- Routine care of cats, showing up on time for routines
- Making a small purchase in a store if appropriate (cat food, toy, and so on)

In cases where children have been abused or exposed to abuse they often learn to abuse animals and eventually others. It is found that cycles of violent behaviors many times begin with

the abuse of an animal (Burch, 2007; Linzey, 2009). Working with these cats appropriately and learning how to handle and care for these pets in an affectionate manner models that appropriate handling of an animal.

Horses are another animal used in animal assisted therapy. Burch notes, “Horses can be used to work on physical skills in ways not possible with other animals” (Burch, 2003, p. 53). Horses demand a sense of balance and control from their riders including posture, strength, mobility, and coordination. Horses are animals that are less available and many people have not been exposed to this kind of animal. This unique opportunity gives people self-confidence. Horses may be a hard program to convince to a principal or others included because they are a larger animal and there are liability concerns. Sidewalkers can be used to help clients ride the horses or other activities can be arranged to suit each client (Burch, 2003).

Skills to be learned from a therapy horse (Burch, 2003):**Cognitive/knowledge**

- Recognizing types of horses
- Learning the names of body parts
- Learning the types of equipment
- Knowing different gaits
- Memorizing patterns for basic dressage
- Knowing the meanings of commands
- Gross motor (big muscles—arms and legs)
- Mounting—lifting leg over the saddle
- Dismounting—swinging leg down
- Putting foot in stirrup

Fine motor (hands)

- Fastening buckles, tying ropes
- Brushing the horse
- Holding the reins
- Holding on to a saddle
- Opening contracted hands

Balance and trunk control

- Bending forward as instructed
- Learning back as instructed
- Sitting up straight
- Holding head up straight
- Holding reins and balancing (without holding onto saddle)
- Coordination—one foot in stirrup, other leg over saddle

Self-esteem

- Boosting self-esteem and self-confidence (ability to control an animal as large as a horse can give a client an instant boost in self-confidence)

Students at an elementary school participated in a therapeutic riding program. They had to learn how to mount the horses, hold on to practice balance and trunk control, feed, and groom the horses. For a child who is sensory sensitive they practice brushing or stroking the horse. Another child who has issues with balance can practice and potentially accomplish sitting on a saddle (Brous, 2010).

Farm animals are good for people who do not want the intense interaction that a dog or other animals may require. These animals are animals that require a different amount of attention and are in need of care and maintenance. The types of chores that can be done for these animals take skill that gives clients a sense of accomplishment and confidence (Burch, 2003).

Skills that can be learned from farm animals (Burch, 2003):**Cognitive/knowledge**

- Names of species
- Information on species care
- Measuring food
- Time concepts—feeding schedules

Gross motor (big muscles—arms and legs)

- Shoveling manure
- Sweeping
- Raking
- Carrying buckets and food pails

Fine motor (hands)

- Brushing coat (if appropriate)
- Picking up eggs
- Pouring food
- Scooping oats
- Milking cows

Speech/communication

- Telling how animals make you feel
- Telling another person about you animal (socialization)
- Writing/dictating a story about the animal(s)
- Reporting animal's status to supervisor

Daily living

- Responsibility
- Being on time
- Being consistent—such as, showing up every morning at 6 a.m.

- Administering routine treatments
- Following a schedule (feeding)

Vocational skills

- Dairy work
- Working on a goat farm
- Working at a stable with horses (related tasks—cleaning stalls and so on)

Burch, 2003 remembers a five year old girl that has elective mutism. She has chosen not to speak to anyone outside of her home for 18 months even though she has the ability to talk. After a 14 step program she began speaking one word phrases to people at school that she was comfortable with, but not until she was presented with an opportunity to help someone feed chickens did she talk to someone outside of her home and school setting. Feeding the chickens gave her the motivation to express her desire to complete the task (Burch, 2003).

Smaller pets are easier to manage than large ones. They require less care and it is easier for a client to learn the skills to care for a small pet quicker than a larger one. They are also inexpensive and less intimidating. Smaller pets are enjoyable to watch and can create a calming environment (Burch, 2003).

Skills you can learn from small or less common animals (Burch, 2003):**Cognitive/knowledge**

- Learning names of species
- Learning information about the history and care of a species

Gross motor (big muscles—arms and legs)

- Reaching out to take the animal (from basket or cage)
- Walking to a specified place to see animal

- Holding out an arm to hold parrot (if appropriate)
- Reaching to touch a llama

Fine motor (hands)

- Controlled movement (touch the animal in a specific spot)
- Feeling the coat of the llama (tactile)
- Stroking a bird's head
- Grasping the edge of a basket to take a guinea pig
- Pouring food
- Getting a pinch of fish food (for food activities, make sure animals are not overfed)

Speech/communication

- Saying words to a bird
- Repeating the words of a bird
- Telling another person about the animal (socialization)

Daily living

- Responsibility (Showing up to care for an animal at specified time)

Behavioral

- Access to animal contingent on appropriate behavior

Physiological

- Calming influence—especially fish

Pet therapy can benefit all learners including those with developmental disabilities. There are many benefits and rewarding moments for the pet, client, and therapist (Burch, 2003).

In Burch's collection of case studies she found Michael. Michael was a five year old boy. After years of sexual abuse he was displaying behavioral problems along with receiving services for emotional disturbance. He was a bright child that struggled socially. This was evident during the daily routine of naptime. Michael would be increasingly disruptive during naptime waking

the other children in the classroom. After behavior assessment they noticed that Michael was most calm watching the class gerbil. They decided to try allowing Michael to sit quietly watching the gerbil during nap. He would sit quietly and calmly watching the gerbil and resting his mind and body. They realized that Michael was afraid to be alone during naptime and the gerbil gave him that sense of safety and companionship (Burch, 2003).

Skills that can be learned in developmental disabilities settings (Burch, 2003):**Cognitive/knowledge**

- Recalling information about animals and breeds
- Remembering/naming the animal and volunteer
- Telling how a particular therapy animal should be cared for

Gross motor (big muscles—arms and legs)

- Walking with a dog or cat
- Throwing a ball to a dog
- Hitting at a toy suspended from a string for a cat
- Holding arm out to take a bird
- Passing a basket or cage of a small animal to another person
- Moving a wheel chair to get to an animal

Fine motor (hands)

- Brushing or combing the therapy animal
- Cleaning a cage or pen (may also be gross motor if shoveling or raking is involved)
- Fastening a leash or collar
- Getting a treat from a box or package
- Feeding a treat to the therapy animal (with handler's permission—if there is any concern client does not have the fine motor control to release the treat, treats can be offered in a clothespin, on the end of a long wooden spoon, or in a plastic bowl held by the client)

- Opening fingers (if hands are contracted) to pet the therapy animal

Speech/communication

- Answering questions about the therapy animal
- Telling another person about the therapy animal
- Telling about a past history with pets
- Saying the animal's name
- Imitating an animal sound
- Giving a hand signal to a therapy animal

Daily living

- Responsibility
- Showing up at an appointed time to care for an animal
- Completing animal care tasks (feeding the animal and cleaning the pen)

Vocational

- Performing vocational animal-related tasks (such as cleaning stalls)
- Reporting the animal's status to a designated staff person
- Learning basic dog obedience with the therapy dog

James was a 13 year old boy that had a severe phobia to dogs. James has Autism and communicates using a combination of verbal speech and sign language. When James saw a dog including a picture or stuffed dog he would panic and become uncontrollable making it difficult to go out in public where there may be a dog. With the help of therapy dogs a program was created for James to help him get over his fear of dogs. In time James was able to pet the therapy dog and his family was able to take him out without concern that they will see a dog (Burch, 2003).

Another example was in the case of Billy, who was a 12 year old boy with profound Mental Retardation and Cerebral Palsy. His muscles contracted in a way that his hands were in a

fixed position. The moisture and pressure were causing his tissue to deteriorate. The doctor saw this as a medical priority and the Occupational therapist and staff made multiple attempts to help Billy do his exercises. He did not like them and refused to do so. They tried to motivate him with food, drink, music, vibration, toys, etc. nothing worked, until they were watching Billy in the courtyard and noticed he responded with excitement to the residential dog. Burch approached Billy and asked him if he would like to give the dog a treat. He squealed with excitement, so she said you have to do your exercises, he agreed. After a few seconds she helped him give the dog a treat with hand over hand motions. They continued this therapy for some time and Billy was able to move his hands in a 45 degree angle, and there was no longer an issue of tissue breakdown. They started a new program with the dog to help Billy work on communication boards, but due to funding and a shortage of staff the program was eliminated (Burch, 2003).

Evidence of Animal-Assisted Therapy in the Classroom Setting

Animal-assisted therapy can come in many forms. Penni is a 13 year old corgi that volunteers at the school for the Deaf in Long Island, New York and Brooklyn, New York. One of the students that she works with is named Thomas who is learning to maintain eye contact and focus with Penni for periods of time. These tasks are difficult for Thomas, but he is able to do it while playing with Penni, giving her treats, or petting her. Thomas is showing a lot of potential and improvement in working with Penni (Mockler, 2010).

Another example of a dog helping a child through animal-assisted therapy is Chad. Chad is a yellow Labrador retriever who is an Autism service dog for an 11 year old Milo. Chad's purpose is to help Milo remain calm, avoiding tantrums and running away. Milo's mother noticed a difference in a week, so much so that Milo eventually was weaned off of some of his medication (Baranauckas, 2009).

Like Chad and Milo, Patrina is a pet therapy dog. She has over 40 commands to help her provide for a student. These include exercises such as reaching for a toy, turning on and off light switches, pulling a student on a scooter and providing sensory support. Patrina is a yellow Labrador retriever who gives student emotional, academic, and motivational support. She helps students by making them feel like the leader when she has them teach her a new command. She worked with one student specifically named Shellsea on her hand-grip strength. Shellsea would hold onto a tug toy and Patrina would pull her around on a scooter. In order to stay on the scooter Shellsea had to adjust her body doing balancing exercises along with her hand-grip exercise (Brous, 2010).

Higgins and Eliza are a team of cockapoos that work with children with Autism. They work with a lot of children who have delays in their nonverbal and verbal communication skills and struggle with social interaction. In working with Higgins and Eliza children expand on their sentences and attempt to communicate with the animals. The dogs create a loving and safe atmosphere for the children and encourage them through enthusiasm and unconditional acceptance. Children that work with Higgins and Eliza have been known to become more affectionate, improve in eye contact and spontaneous conversation. Students are more motivated to do their motor activities and sensory activities when Higgins and Eliza are around. Higgins and Eliza's owner notes that the second she pulls out the therapy vests the dogs get very excited to head to work and see the children (Stone, 2010).

Most of the therapy pets are trained to work with children. Some pets are trained from a young age, others find their niche later in life. Jerry Nihill was a fourth grade teacher. He created a two week hands-on integrated math, science, and literature unit plan about dogs. He decided to get permission to bring his dog Augie into the classroom for the two weeks. Permission was

granted and Augie joined the classroom. He was comfortably tied to Jerry's chair during introduction of lessons in the unit plan. They did things like measured Augie's growth, sat with Augie during silent reading, and researched topics like what kind of roles canines play in society. In the time that Augie spent in the classroom it was found that they had fewer absences, students were increasingly responsible and respectful, the room was kept cleaner because students were fearful that Augie would eat something and students were monitoring their behavior to get the opportunity to sit with Augie and pet him. Augie was such a wonderful asset to the classroom that the parents and principal agreed to let Augie stay in the classroom for the remaining of the year as a classroom pet (Owens & Williams, 1995).

Conclusion

If you do not feel like a classroom pet is right for you, revisit these ideas and consider the benefits of working with animals will have on your students. Think of other options in presenting pets and animals to these children. Whether it be bringing in books about animals, units on animals, or taking a trip to the local farm. Research your community to find volunteers so that they can bring in animals to the classroom that will not be as big of a commitment on your part.

Talk to local dog trainers to see if they have a training program and know of any dogs that have passed the screening process that may be a fit for your classroom to visit. This may connect you to other therapy programs and could be an opportunity for your students to get to work with animals even for a short period of time.

If you are considering having a classroom pet, please review the suggestions and research to find a pet that best fits yourself, your students and your classroom needs. This is a commitment that needs to be taken seriously. By taking proper precautions and committing to this classroom pet the rewards could be endless. However, be prepared for potential outcomes

and adjust accordingly. If a pet does not work for your classroom please take the proper steps of finding a good home for this pet and being an example to your students of appropriate commitment and pet care.

My belief that all learners can benefit from a classroom pet can be best summed up by a quote from Meaden and Jegatheesan.

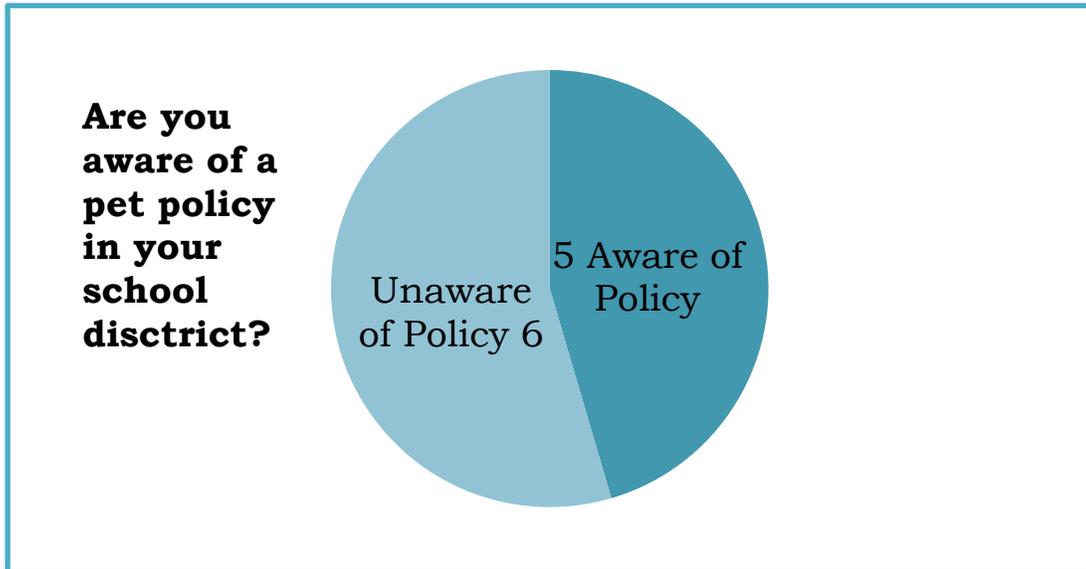
Young children need time and opportunities to build the skills needed to make friends, solve problems, recognize feelings in themselves and others, and express and manage anger and frustration in appropriate ways. Teachers support this development by encouraging children to be nurturing caring, and affectionate toward one another and to animals. Maria Montessori emphasized the importance of animals in a child's life by creating a curriculum in which young children's animal care experiences were an important component (Meaden & Jegatheesan, 2010, p. 75-76).

Methods

This study was conducted using a survey created on www.surveymonkey.com. This survey was designed with 10 questions focusing on the many aspects of pets in the classroom. This survey was distributed via www.facebook.com. Participants of the survey were both well-known friends of the author and unknown participants of the author. The sample size included 12 participants. The known participants ranged from relatively new to teaching to many years of experience. The known participants' locations varied from New York, Michigan, Texas, and Florida, this does not include the unknown participants. The author sorted each question individually and categorized the responses by charts. The author looked for trends in individual questions and consistent responses.

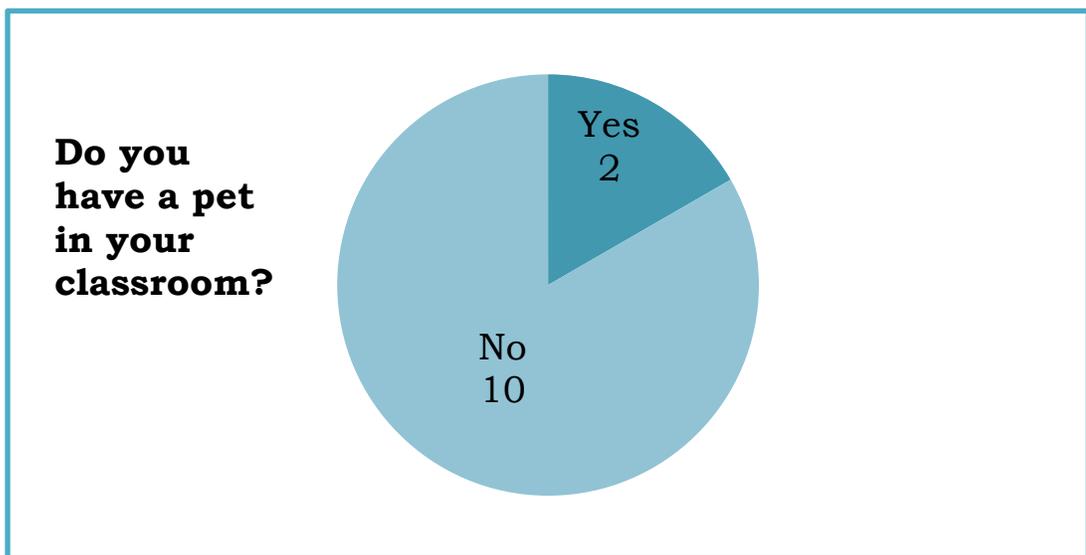
Results

1. Are you aware of a pet policy at your school? If so please describe the policy.



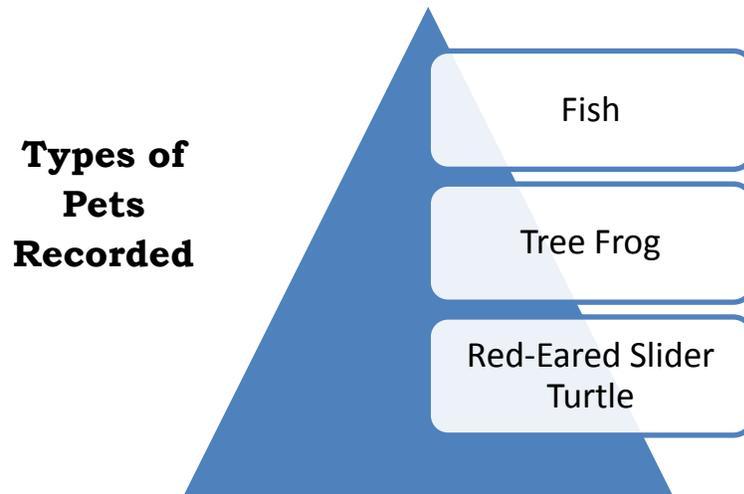
- ✓ 11/12 participants responded to this question.
- ✓ 5 participants said they were aware of a policy, 6 said they were not.
- ✓ For the participants that described their policy 2 stated there were no pets allowed and 2 stated no animals with feathers or fur.

2. Do you have a pet in your classroom?

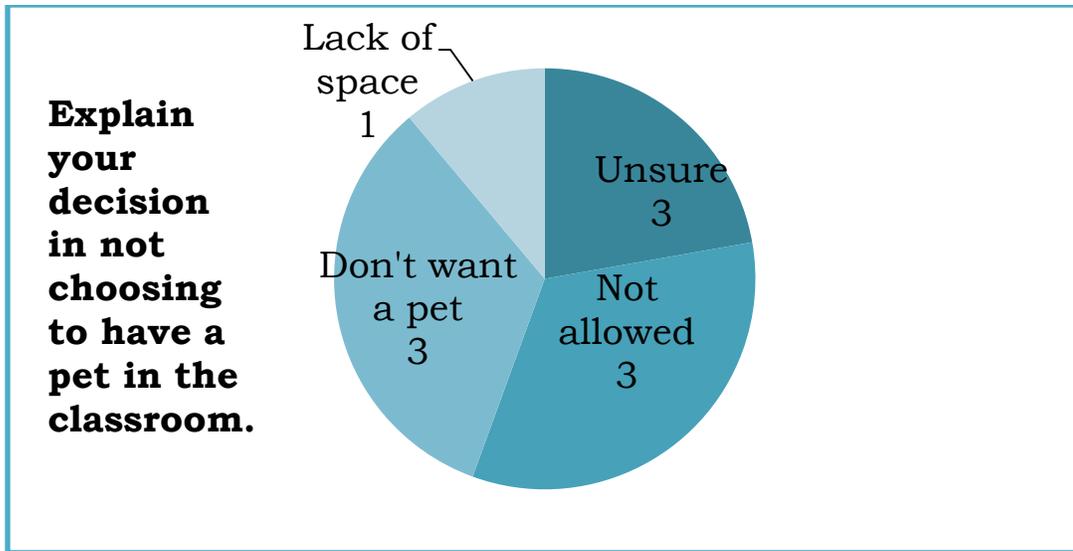


- ✓ 12/12 participants responded.
- ✓ 10 participants declared no pets in their classroom.
- ✓ 2 participants declared that they do have pets in their classroom.

3. If so please describe the type of pet and any changes you have seen in the classroom since bringing in a pet.

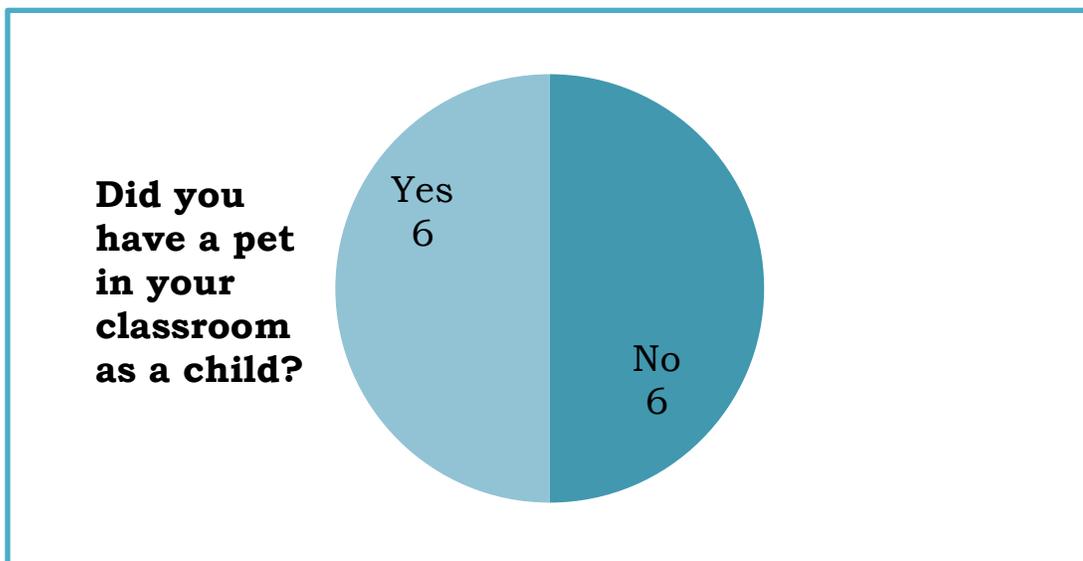


- ✓ 3/12 participants responded to this question
 - ✓ Participants have 3 types of pets in their classrooms; fish, tree frog and 2 red-eared slider turtles
 - ✓ Participant A shared their classroom story of the positive experience of dealing with the loss of pets and the students mourning their fish friends
 - ✓ Participant B discussed the benefits of watching activity and changes in behavior
- 4. If no, please explain your decision in not choosing to have a pet in your classroom.**



- ✓ 10/12 participants responded
- ✓ 1 participant lacked space for a pet in their classroom
- ✓ 3 were unsure as to why they did not choose to have a pet in the classroom
- ✓ 3 participants were not allowed to have pets due to policy
- ✓ 3 participants do not want a pet in their classroom

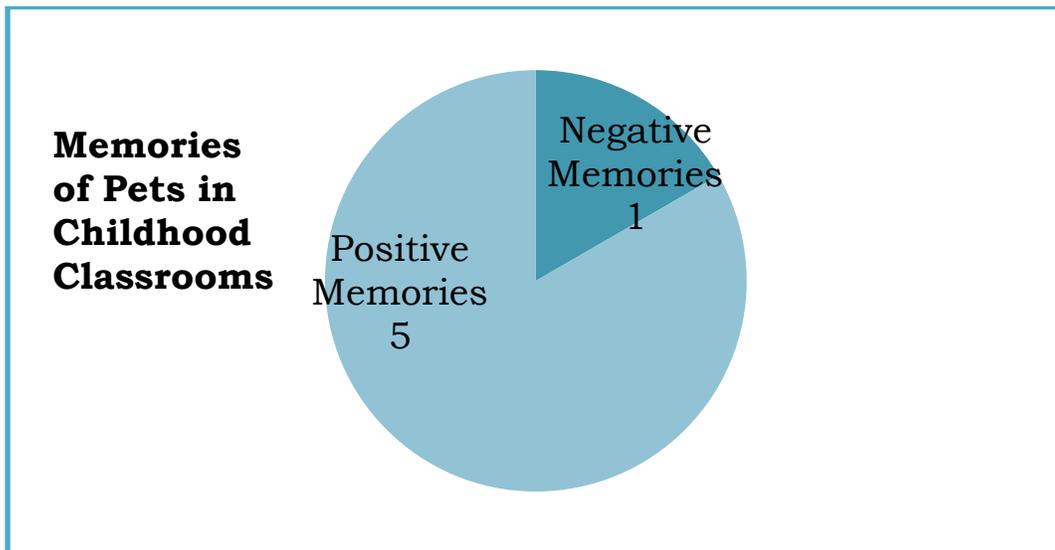
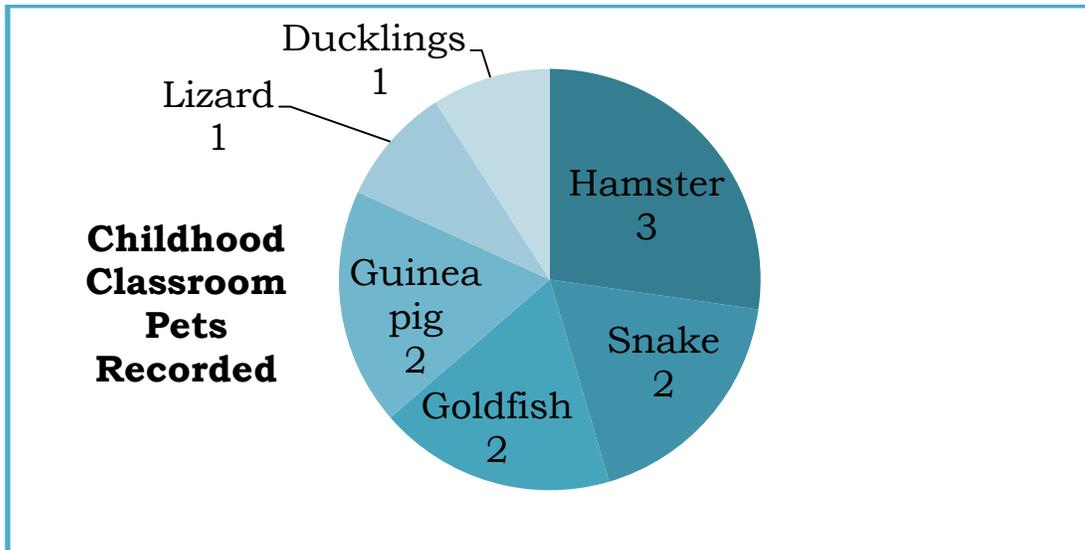
5. **Did you have a pet in your classroom as a child?**



- ✓ 12/12 participants responded

- ✓ 6 stated that they did have pets in their classroom
- ✓ 6 stated that they did not have pets in their classroom

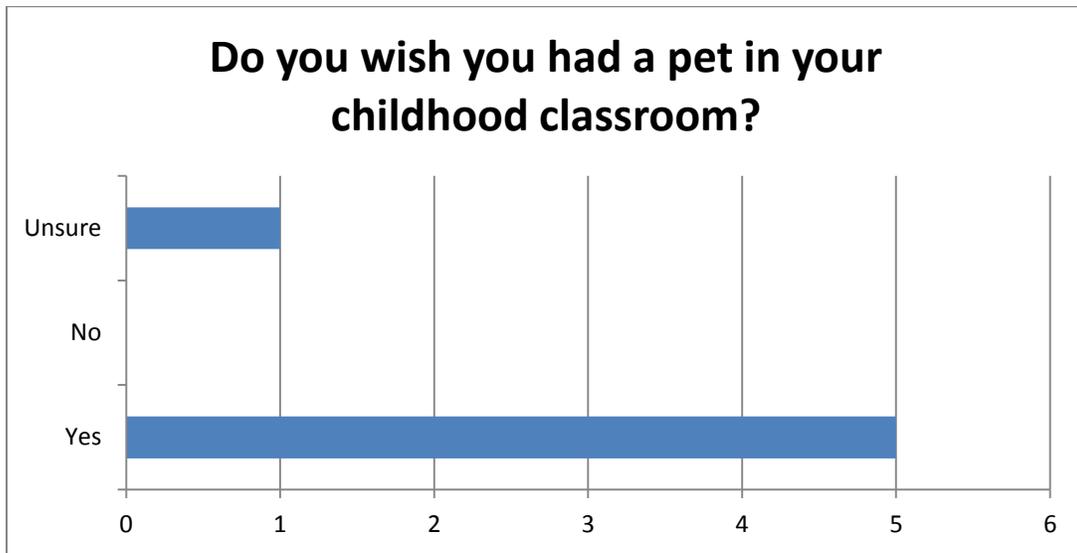
6. If yes please describe type of pet(s) and select memories or feelings about the pet(s).



- ✓ 6/12 participants responded to question
- ✓ Participants stated that the following animals were found in their childhood classrooms; Hamster, snake, goldfish, guinea pig, lizard, duckling
- ✓ 5 participants shared positive memories about their childhood classroom pet

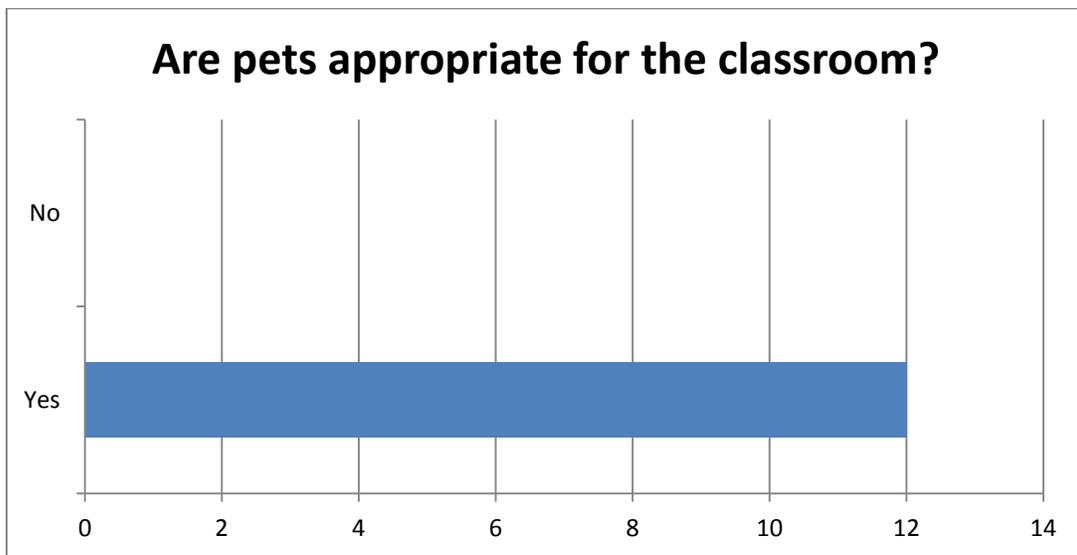
- ✓ 1 participant shared a negative memory about their childhood classroom pet

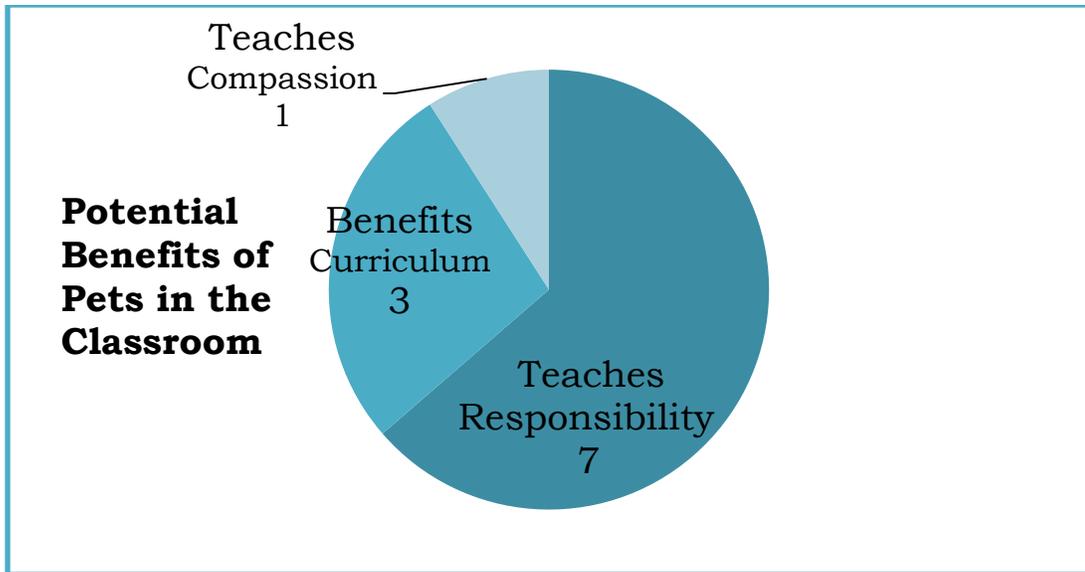
7. If no, do you wish you had pets in your classroom as a child? Why or why not?



- ✓ 6/12 participants responded to this question
- ✓ The majority of responding participants stated that they would have liked to have a pet in their classroom as a child

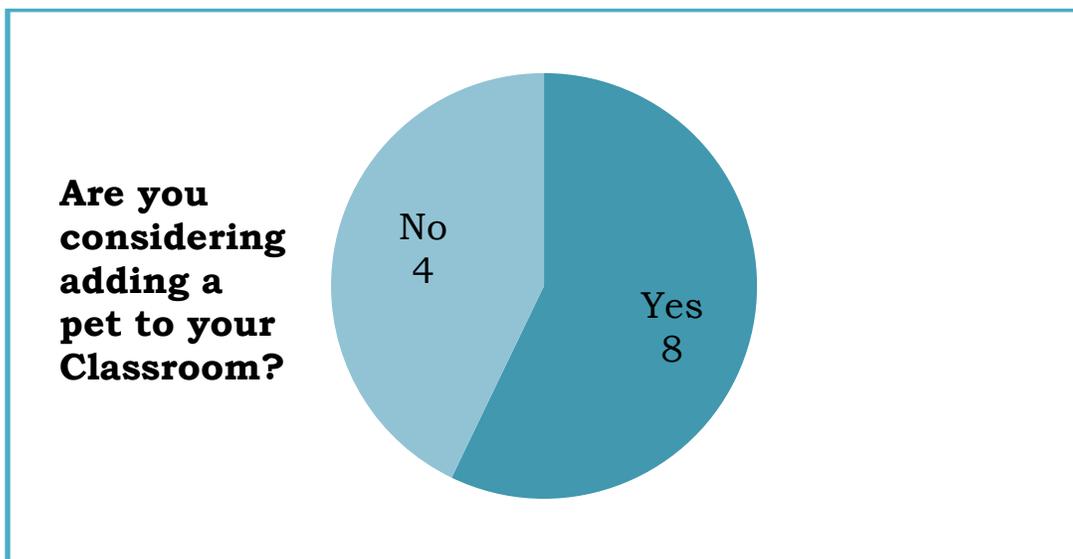
8. Do you feel pets are an appropriate addition to the classroom? Why or why not?





- ✓ 12/12 participants responded to this question
- ✓ 3 participants responded that pets are appropriate with added conditions; classroom fit, purpose of pet, and lack of distractions

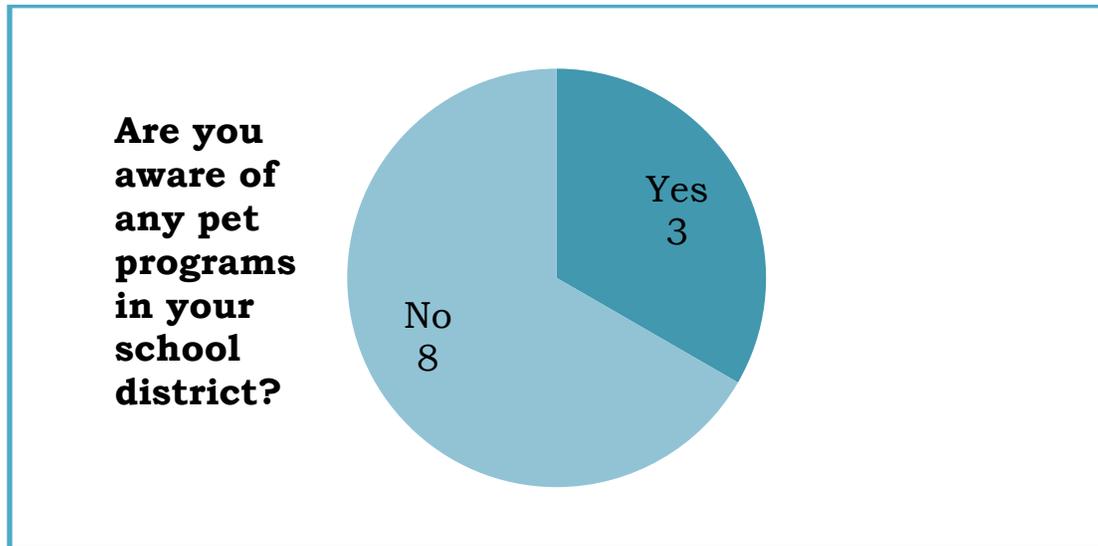
9. Are you considering (if not already have) adding a pet to your classroom?



- ✓ 12/12 participants responded
- ✓ 8 participants stated yes they are considering a pet in the classroom
- ✓ 4 participants said no they are not

- ✓ The 3 participants that are not allowed to have pets prefer pets in the classroom

10. **Are you aware of any pet therapy programs in your school district? If yes, please describe what kind(s)?**



- ✓ 11/12 participants responded to this question
- ✓ 8 participants did not recall any pet therapy programs in their school district
- ✓ 3 participants did recall pet programs in their school district
- ✓ 2 participants described dogs coming into their building as reading buddies

Discussion

Many participants do not have pets in the classroom although they all believe that the classroom is an appropriate place for a pet. Participants voiced concerns of caring for pet, respecting policy, and concerns for the purpose of the pet in the classroom.

If majority states that a classroom is an appropriate place for a pet why are pets not allowed? If allergies are the cause for concerns, this piece of research proves that there are other options for that specific classroom. If participants do not want to care for pets, there are low

maintenance pets available for them. Teachers need to research the pets that will best suit their needs and the needs of their students.

Research shows that pets can benefit a classroom setting in all aspects of students, environment and curriculum. It shows that the majority of concerns can be avoided with attention, research, and preparation if the teacher is willing.

There are gaps in the research about Pets in the Classroom. There are not many pieces of literature that provide specifically correlated studies of pets in the classroom setting. Literature was found in many articles that talked about pet therapy with children and adults, some articles that discussed the impact of animals and humans, but the research for pets although existing was sparse.

Pets can benefit the classroom setting and with more research to back up this idea school districts may get the information needed to reduce the likelihood of no pets policies. Students may get a chance for a well-rounded educational experience and teachers may be able to see the effects that a classroom pet can have on the students.

Researcher's Stance

As a young girl that grew up on a farm I always felt that animals had a large part in my development. I learned many of my daily life skills from helping animals and some of life's hardest lessons. I was often responsible for bottle feeding the calves, helping with the small animal barns, searching for eggs, and following my dad to check on each animal's habitat. At times I would find myself asking questions about the animals and my dad would answer them with a little extra information tied in. All of this was very natural to me and a significant part of my maturation.

As a teacher I had the fortunate experience of student teaching in a Kindergarten classroom in East Detroit School Districts. We had a classroom pet named Pudge, after our favorite Detroit Tiger's player. He sat on the window sill in his cage next to the reading center. The students in the classroom would often take time sitting in the bean bags reading to Pudge, talking to Pudge, or showing them their newest artwork. We encouraged students that were struggling on an assignment to talk it out with Pudge, having trouble with a friend, talk it out with Pudge, feeling a little sad today, talk it out with Pudge.

Pudge had a portable pen that fit perfectly on the desks during group work or independent time so that he could be a part of the work. Students would show Pudge their progress and appeared motivated to stay on task to impress Pudge and have the opportunity to keep him at their desks. During rest period if they remained on their cots Pudge was allowed to roll around in his hamster ball and visit each friend.

The students were responsible for taking care of his habitat. They would check his water and food each day. They learned how to use "two finger touches" to gently pet Pudge and would sit calmly holding him with the assistance and specific judgment of the teacher.

I watched as these children changed overtime working with this specific hamster. The child that had a hard time with anger would find himself talking and at times crying to Pudge. The student that was too embarrassed to read in front of the class would ask to read a story quietly with Pudge. The child who struggled staying on task would ask that the timed timer was set so that he could make sure he had enough time to visit with Pudge after he completed his project. All of these benefits from this particular experience raised a question for me. Are pets an important asset to the classroom? After completing this research and reviewing my own experience my answer would be yes. I would like to hope that after reading this Capstone readers

would agree and take time to research the possibility of pets in the classroom and encourage others to do the same.

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