A Model for Using Interaction with Horses to Increase Reading Motivation in First Grade Urban Students

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PURPOSE
The purpose of this study was to examine if a program using structured contact with an animal paired with a corresponding book and reinforcing curriculum could motivate first grade students to read.

ABSTRACT
The purpose of this study was to examine if a program using structured contact with an animal paired with a corresponding book and reinforcing curriculum could motivate first grade students to read. According to the US Department of Education, 20% of American adults and 44% of minority youth are functionally illiterate (2002). If a child is excited and motivated to read from the beginning, it is likely that attitude will continue throughout his/her life (IDOE, 2002). According to the Biophilia Hypothesis (Kellert & Wilson, 1993) there is an inherent human need to affiliate with life and lifelike processes. Capitalizing on this inherent attraction paired with components of successful literacy programs could serve as an intrinsic and extrinsic motivator for students. The enhanced program design included multiple opportunities for structured interaction with an animal related to a book they read during the program, integrated classroom curriculum, regular motivational feedback and social celebration of achievement. The subjects were multi-ethnic First Grade students from the Indiana Public School System. They were given pre and post-test focusing on three key areas: 1.) Reading motivation, 2.) Literacy awareness and 3.) Horse knowledge. The methodology also included observation, interview, and surveys including written narratives.

The results of the study support the use of animals to motivate children to read. Parents and teachers (99%) reported that students were more motivated to read. The qualitative data from parents and teachers as well indicates the students were more enthusiastic and eager to learn about horses after participating in the program. The pre and post-test results also indicate that there was an increase in literacy awareness including an increase in utilizing classroom libraries during free time. The overall finding was that programs using this model could serve to motivate children to read; not only with horses but with other animals as well. This study also led to the formation of an Animal Assisted Learning Model which was developed to provide structure and strength to these types of experiences ensuring consistent outcomes.