

# Reading to Dogs in Schools: A Controlled Feasibility Study of an Online Reading to Dogs Intervention

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## Background & Aims

**Background:** Reading to Dogs (RTD) is a form of Animal-assisted Education (AAE) thought to benefit pupil wellbeing and reading outcomes, and is growing in international popularity and prevalence. However rigorous scientific evidence in support of the practice is limited, and risk to the welfare of all stakeholders (pupils, staff, dogs) is an area of concern. Furthermore, current practice lacks a pedagogical framework and little evidence of teacher perspectives of RTD exists. This study was informed by two studies that addressed these aspects (Steel et al., 2021 and Steel et al., 2022, see 'Academic Papers' below).

**Aim:** This study evaluated an online RTD intervention named Paws and Learn (PAL), examining its impact on children's wellbeing and reading affect (anxiety, confidence, attitudes) and frequency, and its feasibility and practicality for the classroom.

## Methods

### Participants

106 Primary 5 pupils (aged 9 years) and 6 teachers from 3 Scottish primary schools .

1 PAL dog (Labradoodle) named Archie, aged 2 years.

1 Handler (also the researcher).

### The PAL Intervention

Four week duration

Multi-component:

RTD session online once per week with PAL dog

Storytelling of key Book Box text by handler in company of PAL dog

PAL Notebook (for free personal writing, drawing, doodling)

PAL Connectors (PAL Bookmark, Poster, Wellbeing Book, all featuring the PAL dog)

PAL Book Box (range of animal-themed books to suit range of abilities and interests)

### Procedure

Pre-test post-test control group design.

Mixed methods included wellbeing and reading affect /frequency questionnaires for all 106 pupils, and interviews (3 teachers, and a sub-sample of 33 pupils). A questionnaire evaluating the PAL components for intervention group teachers and pupils was also implemented.

## Results

- Mixed results.
- Quantitative analysis did not show significant improvements in wellbeing or reading affect and frequency.
- Qualitative analysis suggested benefits to wellbeing and reading affect. Reported benefits largely aligned with benefits in literature to date.
- PAL components were rated highly, particularly the PAL Notebook.
- Teachers and pupils deemed the intervention to be practical and feasible for the classroom, particularly if technological challenges can be overcome.

### Reading to Dogs (RTD)

RTD is defined as a child reading to a fully assessed and registered dog selected for this purpose and accompanied by a handler. The rationale behind it is that the dog may be a non-judgemental and comforting listener, supporting reduced anxiety, increased confidence and improved attitudes towards reading.

## Discussion & Implications for Education

This was the first known trial of an online RTD intervention. While most practice lacks a pedagogical framework and involves little more than a dog placed next to a child who reads to it, PAL includes complementary resources intended to consolidate and extend any benefits, and is aligned to the curriculum. The online format eliminated risk to all stakeholders, and involved a less entrenched, more ephemeral relationship with the dog which could be helpful in overcoming any sense of loss when the PAL Intervention ends. Limitations included the short term nature of the study and various effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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### Academic papers

Steel, J., Williams, J. M., & McGeown, S. (2021). Reading to dogs in schools: an exploratory study of teacher perspectives. *Educational Research*, 63(3), 279-301.

Steel, J., Williams, J. M., & McGeown, S. (2022). Teacher-researcher collaboration in animal-assisted education: Co-designing a reading to dogs intervention. *Educational Research*, 1-19.

Steel, J. (2023). Reading to Dogs in schools: a controlled feasibility study of an online reading to Dogs intervention. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 117, 102117.

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