

Chapter 31

Human–Canine Synergy: Learning Interventions in Elementary School

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the basic concept and the components of the dogs in learning program, as a manifestation of the human-canine synergy in education, in use at the American Community Schools Athens. The implementation of the program at the school has shown that various curriculum subjects can be taught more effectively and in a playful and enjoyable manner, when the learner is fully engaged with the help of dogs in the learning process. By following all levels of the human-canine synergy and a spiral curriculum using instructional dogs, several basic issues related to human behavior and education are internalized by the students, and inspire them to develop the wisdom to transform their educational experience, the basic educational contribution of the dogs in learning program.

INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions must inspire their students to develop the wisdom to transform their educational experience into social, economic, environmental, intellectual and ethical resources to improve their lives. Academic institutions, now more than ever, have to provide new educational opportunities and experiences. The American Community School of Athens (ACS), a private, non-profit, preK-12 institution whose mission is to be a student-centered embracing American educational philosophy, principles and values, strongly believes in fulfilling that need. In addition, ACS by having a culture of developing and implementing innovative programs to transform student's lives, has developed and implemented an educational approach called Dogs in Learning (DiL).

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The ever-present desire of the ACS Athens' leadership to utilize in its program, a new integrated educational approach utilizing dogs in teaching and learning has applied (K-5) this new program (DiL), which was reported by the ACS staff that had participated in its initiation (Birbil et al.,2015). This program manifests the Human-Canine Synergy (HCS) in education and it is designed to use highly trained instructional dogs as a determining tool to help children understand and apply pedagogic issues, and thus create a fresh and innovative approach to teaching and learning.

This approach is based on the understanding that: first, dogs, like humans, possess psychological and behavioral norms, and thus dogs' actions can easily relate to human behavior and manifested in education; and second the Human-Canine Synergy, which is a concept recently introduced to indicate the affiliation of humans and dogs (Koutsopoulos & Koutsopoulos, 2018a) is a determining factor in considering the role of DiL in any educational approach. In order to understand these two issues and their creative role towards a new educational approach utilizing dogs, there is a need to briefly clarify the basic issues of the Human Canine Synergy in education.

DIL IN EDUCATION

Dogs in Learning as a dynamic pedagogical approach to be successful must encompass the intellectual and social shaping of the human character of students, in successfully fitting in any form of non-traditional learning methodology, and in supporting educational excellence.

DiL and Intellectual Shaping

In general, the DiL program is part of an approach focusing on successfully combining academic, emotional, physical, intellectual and ethical components of education, in order to ensure a healthy and balanced individual. That is, students address all questions in a holistic approach not only intellectually but also emotionally. Whether it is a question in reading, in mathematics or social studies, they are immersed in the learning process using all of their senses at the same time and thus their intellectual ability is holistically challenged.

More specifically, in the Dogs in Learning program students when answering a meaningful question related to the amount of food a specific dog needs to survive or how much it will cost to keep a dog healthy, basically eliminate the usual questions asked by them such as “why it is important to learn a specific concept?” or “where am I going to use this mathematical concept”? At the same time, principles and values such as: is it OK to abuse a dog? What is our responsibility to helpless animals as ethical citizens? These questions need to be tested, answered and reinforced. That is, these philosophical/educational concepts promoting the development of communication, critical thinking, and public speaking can be achieved by utilizing dogs.

DiL and Blended Practices

The DiL program by its nature has to be part of a blended learning practice. It confirms Avgerinou, et al., (2014) conclusions that students using the DiL methodology are engaged in learning opportunities that exist in many forms, and thus learning occurs anywhere, anytime, with the support of instructional

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