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Research article

## Cultivating cultural capital with a therapy dog in a third-grade classroom

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## Abstract

This article examines interactions between humans and animals in an elementary school environment in the south-west of the United States and investigates an under-examined area of social pedagogy, sharing some of the ways that a canine in the classroom can help to improve education. The goal was to co-create community and hold space for young learners to engage with the curriculum in new and innovative ways, drawing on their unique funds of identity and cultural and linguistic capital. The article explores how the involvement of a therapy dog in a third-grade classroom over the course of nine weeks addressed the effects of linguicism and offers examples of a cross-species opportunity to make school more inviting, particularly for students who are segregated based on their language. This work took place in a Title I school in a neighbourhood where many families have low incomes and most children are fluent in languages other than English. These children became teachers and the dog learned to read.

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**Keywords** social pedagogy; human–animal interaction; linguicism; teaching a dog to read; cultural capital

## Introduction

This article describes a nine-week collaborative project working with a therapy dog and young children experiencing various education challenges. It highlights interspecies learning as a new area of research and practice in social pedagogy and builds on emerging scholarship documenting what happens when children connect a canine with language curriculum in an under-served school. The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of a therapy dog on third-grade Spanish-dominant students' literacy confidence and classroom community. The article explores this goal-directed human–animal interaction as a form of social pedagogy (Fung, 2017; Hallyburton and Hinton, 2017; Moore et al., 2013).

The approach was theoretically based on human–animal interaction (Gee et al., 2017; Levinson et al., 2017; Mickelsson, 2019), social pedagogy (Johnston et al., 2015) and research on funds of knowledge (Llopart and Esteban-Guitart, 2017, 2018) and identity (Hogg and Volman, 2020) with marginalised students in subtractive schooling environments that decrease a student's sense of belonging (Valenzuela, 2005).

In his depiction of contemporary school segregation and the characteristics of low-income communities that can result in socially reproduced suboptimal outcomes for young learners, MacLeod (2009) explained the marginalising factors of ethnicity and language and how these factors position students in under-resourced schools where their cultural capital is typically not valued, where they have fewer opportunities to make decisions about their learning and where school culture values quick compliance as a means to prepare students for careers where they will be workers rather than leaders. One example of this practice that we encountered required students to respond in alphabetical order, as it trained them to submit to, rather than question, authority. This tactic directly opposed core philosophies of social pedagogy (Bourdieu and Passeron, 2000; Giroux, 2019) including Freire's (1989) requirement for critical questioning, as will become clearer in the case study examples.

Many children in the present study experienced exclusion and oppression, including classism and linguicism, given their status as low-income students becoming bilingual. Specifically, many students spoke Spanish as their primary language, and the state had mandated that all elementary students who were not fluent in English must spend four hours of every school day immersed in speaking, reading, writing and listening to English, while not being allowed to speak their dominant language(s) in the classroom. Furthermore, these four hours could not cover testable material, and thus did not provide the instruction that English-speaking students received, a policy that routinely resulted in Spanish-dominant students falling far behind their English-speaking peers. Language is intricately and intimately tied to self and culture (González, 2001) and inextricably linked to educational outcomes (Bronkhorst and Akkerman, 2016; MacLeod, 2009; Tewell, 2020; Valenzuela, 2005).

Separating students based on English fluency is not best practice (Ordóñez et al., 2021). This does not allow Spanish-dominant students to quickly ask or answer questions, comment or communicate efficiently in their native language. Segregation restricts learning and may make students feel unwelcome (Valenzuela, 2005), often resulting in suboptimal outcomes for students in English immersion programmes (Lillie et al., 2012).

Although teachers worked diligently to support every learner, in time this legislated linguicism (Proposition 203, 2000) snared many students in a revolving cycle of failure because they spent more than half of each school day using an unfamiliar language rather than learning grade-appropriate content. Valenzuela (2005) called linguicism a subtractive schooling practice because it diminished rather than augmented the basic ability to communicate fluently and achieve an education.

## Students who teach also learn

Additive schooling practices can mitigate these suboptimal outcomes, and demonstrating genuine care and concern can improve the school experience for students who speak Spanish in an English-dominant education system (Valenzuela, 2005). Examples include having students give presentations about their

cultural traditions, religious practices, foods and language so that classmates learn from each other (Volman and 't Gilde, 2021). Empowering students to explore or explain topics of their own choice creates a sense of trust and responsibility, forming relationships between teachers and students (Ordóñez et al., 2021). Discussing the topic before students' presentations gives teachers a chance to ask questions and gives students an opportunity to clarify their content, helping students to feel respected and invested in teaching their classmates (Volman and 't Gilde, 2021). When experienced on a regular basis, these practices validate students' cultural and linguistic capital and contribute to countering the harsh effects of subtractive schooling, pulling students into school, as opposed to pushing them out (Saunders and Wong, 2020; Valenzuela, 2005; Volman and 't Gilde, 2021). Some examples of these practices were seen at Moore Elementary School, as will be explained later on.

These student-becoming-the-teacher exchanges do more than tap funds of knowledge. Volman and 't Gilde (2021) presented a nuanced layer of complexity reflecting students' ownership of the process, referring to funds of identity bearing the distinction that students are the authorities of their teaching and learning, upholding the humanistic, holistic tenets of social pedagogy (Hogg and Volman, 2020). Identity is valued and validated when students choose their own topics, name their individual expertise and ascribe meaning to their unique knowledge and experiences. This student-centred, student-led approach results in classmates learning more about each other and creates community in the process. The community, in turn, values diversity and students feel connected with their education rather than disconnected from it (Valenzuela, 2005).

## Project overview and methods

This section presents the overview of a case study of a cross-species experience drawing on students' funds of identity, empowering them to teach and learn in meaningful ways while creating community in the classroom. In this case, the 9-year-old students became teachers and the canine became the learner. Twenty-five third-grade Spanish-dominant students in a Title I elementary school in the south-west of the United States worked together in small, teacher-selected groups to teach a therapy dog how to read. Each five-to-six-member group met weekly for 45 minutes per week over the course of nine weeks. This class had been segregated because of its members' language, as mandated by state law, and the students spent four hours of each school day in the required activities of speaking, reading, writing and listening to English, rather than learn grade-appropriate content. (All names are pseudonyms except Pakuna.)

In Moore Elementary, the pre-kindergarten-grade 5 focal school, 97 per cent of the 730 students were Latino/a, and their canine on campus was Pakuna, a 6-year-old male Labrador Retriever–Golden Retriever cross-breed with service and therapy credentials. Twelve boys and 13 girls participated in the small group activities. They designed and administered Pakuna's lessons, vetted for safety by an experienced trainer and two veterinary surgeons. I discovered promising methods for practising social pedagogy within school walls and across human–animal boundaries (Mickelsson, 2019; Moore et al., 2013).

As a participant observer, I took field notes and photographs and *facilitated* these lessons. I did not dictate their content. Instead, establishing an initial sense of community, I helped the students to identify parallels between their learning experiences and Pakuna's learning, so that the students could reflect and modify their instructional methods when necessary.

The following sections describe the process of incorporating Pakuna into the third-grade language curriculum with the goal of empowering marginalised students to teach a dog to read, while increasing their sense of belonging at school. The process is described chronologically and draws from my participant observations and field notes. Subsequent sections detail strategies used for building community, the power of homework, a potential cross-species approach to countering linguisticism and reflections.

## Introducing Pakuna to the class

Teaching a dog to read may seem like a counter-productive activity for students who speak Spanish in an English-dominant school, but it works by drawing on students' funds of identity and knowledge (Volman and 't Gilde, 2021) in unique and important ways. I began by introducing Pakuna to the class. Pakuna

was a friendly dog with short, strawberry-blond fur covering his tall, lean 80-pound frame. After meeting the children, he demonstrated some of his extraordinary dog skills, such as catching a biscuit, followed by his phenomenal listening-to-directions skills, including sitting politely while shaking hands with the teacher. Next, I answered the students' questions about Pakuna's favourite activities, colours and foods, his vital statistics – such as his age, weight, birthplace and number of siblings – and where his family lived.

Then I asked the students to tell Pakuna about themselves, their interests and, inevitably, their family dogs, cats, birds and fish, all of whom had something in common with Pakuna, according to the students. Camila raised her hand and said, 'My dog looks exactly like Pakuna, but my dog's small and has long black fur.' More hands raised. Carlos said, 'We don't have a dog, but Pakuna looks like our middle cat. We have three cats. He looks like Plata. It means "silver" in Spanish. Pakuna sounds like Plata – not the bark and meow, just Pakuna and Plata.'

I acknowledged Carlos's use of the Spanish language, recognising his linguistic capital, and thanked him for teaching us a new word and increasing our vocabulary. I then asked whether anyone else wanted to tell us about their furry, finned or feathered family members. Valeria told us, 'My family, we don't have dogs and cats but we have someone like Pakuna too! He's a parrot. Parrot sounds like Pakuna, like Plata. We call her "Vistosa". It means "colourful" in Spanish. Her feathers are colourful.' I respected Valeria's translation, reiterated the commonality of these words beginning with the same 'P' sound, and thanked her for enriching the conversation by contributing this new layer of analysis – phonetic awareness! Jorge said, 'I teach my big dog to shake hands too', and Pedro confirmed that he'd been 'to Jorge's house, and his dog can shake hands like Pakuna'.

Celebrating the confluence of English and Spanish as everyone who wanted to contribute to the conversation did so, we began co-constructing community with these exchanges that honoured cultural and linguistic capital (Cameron et al., 2011, 2015). Then I jeopardised this fragile new relationship by mentioning that students have a job – learning – and I asked whether they would like Pakuna to join their class as a learner. Without exception, the students shouted, 'Yes!' I asked students how they do a lot of their learning, gently steering the conversation towards the idea of learning by reading, until finally, I posed the question, 'How many students think that a dog can read?' I counted the raised hands and recorded that number on the board at the front of the room.

### **Pakuna's pre-test and invitations**

I asked the students how we could answer this question definitively as researchers, and eventually we arrived at the idea that when teachers want to know whether a student can read they should test the student. We'd have to test Pakuna and then we'd know for sure. And that's exactly what happened next. The students invigilated a reading test by gathering a few common items such as an eraser, a marker, a piece of paper and a book. They lined up these items at the front of the room and listed each item on the board. We discussed two simple rules: (1) if the student pointed to a word and Pakuna got that item, then he was reading, otherwise, he was just guessing; and (2) no hints, no helping. It was a test, and so Pakuna had to work independently. Then, the students administered the test. Pakuna failed. The students reluctantly admitted that, according to the rules, as assessed by a fair test, Pakuna could not read.

I highlighted Pakuna's embarrassment, noting his refusal to face the students, his back turned towards them after failing this test. I asked Pakuna's new friends how they thought he felt. When Isabel said, 'He feels bad like when I did bad on my spelling test', I agreed and asked whether everyone still wanted Pakuna as a member of their class, even though, as they discovered, he could not read. Again without exception, the students shouted, 'Yes!' Then, I asked Pakuna whether he wanted to join the class, but he would not face his new friends. Instead, he remained ostensibly embarrassed by his lack of reading ability. I asked our friends how they might convince Pakuna to come back, and one of the students said, 'We could make invitations so he won't be sad and he can come back.' I asked what sort of content they might include in such an invitation, and the creativity and kindness flowed as they explained their ideas: 'We can say, "We love you, Pakuna, and you're a great dog! Please come back to our class!"; "We don't care if you can't read. I can't read that good too.' In this conversation, students began sharing their funds of identity as scholars and practising social pedagogy as they built cross-species relationships.

Next, I reminded students that if Pakuna were to attend classes, he had to be a learner like them. I asked,

Do you think that Pakuna might want to come back if you promise to read to him, because he's such a great listener and loves stories? And, what if you promise to teach him how to read? Do you think he might want to come back if your invitations mentioned that? And, what if you illustrated your invitations, because he can't read them?

I enquired in a low voice with my hands cupped around my lips to avoid embarrassing Pakuna further. 'But he might get the idea if he saw the pictures – what do you think? Is it worth a try? Do you want to make the invitations?' Another resounding, 'Yes!' filled the air. Only Fatah hesitated, 'I can't teach Pakuna. I don't read very good.' I replied, 'Can you read even one word, like maybe "F-a-t-a-h"?' I spelled as I wrote on the board, and he giggled and said that he could read his own name. I covered Pakuna's ears and said that Fatah could already read more words than Pakuna could read, so Fatah might be a great teacher. Fatah smiled as he nodded. I promised to try my best to convince Pakuna to come back to class once more so that students could read the invitations and explain the illustrations to him, and Pakuna could make up his mind about joining the class. The students agreed.

Pakuna and I returned to Moore Elementary School the following week and were greeted with smiles and giggles as our new friends proudly held up their invitations for Pakuna to see. Children raised their hands. The teacher called on the first student and said, 'Let's show Pakuna how you can read to him in alphabetical order. Ready?' One by one, students read their invitations to Pakuna who had settled onto the circle rug beside me at the back of the classroom. While the rest of the class continued with whole-group activities, each child took a turn sitting near Pakuna or lying down next to him so that Pakuna could see the invitations properly. Marco was the first to join us. He said, 'I worked hard on mine because I love Pakuna.' Then he faced Pakuna and began, 'We all love you, Pakuna. You should come back. Everyone want you back. It's okay you can't read. We love you.' Then, Marco told Pakuna about the illustration. 'See, Pakuna? That's you and that's me', he said, pointing to the images on the page. 'I'm reading to you for you can learn to read too. What's Pakuna's favourite book? We'll read it to you! Just come back!' After petting Pakuna a few more times, Marco returned to his seat and the student next in the alphabet appeared with her invitation.

To help Pakuna listen carefully to the shy students who read in a whisper, I gently lifted Pakuna's ear flaps, sometimes prompting more giggles. After everyone had read their invitations and explained their illustrations, we publicly assessed Pakuna's comfort level, remarking that he seemed more relaxed after hearing his friends' invitations, and we checked with the students for confirmation. They observed his wagging tail and said that Pakuna looked happy to come back to school. Emphasising Pakuna's freedom of choice, I asked the students what they thought about us taking their invitations home so that I could re-read them to Pakuna and he could have a chance to think about the proposition before potentially committing to becoming a member of the class. The students agreed to Pakuna's terms and we left with the stack of brightly coloured invitations promising to email the teacher with Pakuna's final decision in a few days.

## Students become teachers

I re-read the invitations to Pakuna at home and I explained the illustrations again. Happily, after due consideration, Pakuna decided to join his new friends as a member of their class. We returned to Moore Elementary School a few days later to begin Pakuna's promised reading lessons. But first, I asked the students how they might go about teaching Pakuna to read, since he'd agreed to come to school with them. This step not only intentionally drew on students' funds of knowledge as they recalled learning to read, but also on their funds of identity as readers and teachers. Pakuna was empowered to make his choice about attending school with his new friends, and they were equally empowered to proceed with his lessons in ways that personally made sense to them. I told students that their teachers had to create lesson plans whenever they wanted the students to learn something new, and so maybe it was a good idea for students, as new teachers, to create lesson plans too. Those words were the only 'instructions' that we provided, and the children began sharing their ideas about teaching Pakuna to read. I said that their teacher's lesson plans had to be written down in case a substitute came and needed to know what to do that day, and I asked whether these young teachers wanted to write out their lesson plans too. Before I could finish asking, Isla interjected, 'We can write it and put a picture too, right, for everyone can know what to do!' – soon, the room buzzed with lesson plans in the making.

## Building community

This willingness to share ideas contributes to creating community, and for students who may feel isolated and inferior on campus, community can make school more welcoming. Children feel welcome and valued when they are listened to with care and respect (Valenzuela, 2005; Volman and 't Gilde, 2021). Just as Pakuna listened carefully with his ear flaps raised, we listened attentively as our young friends talked about learning to read. Adriana said that she learned to read, 'when my *tía* read to me at bedtime'. Pedro said that his brother showed him how to read, and Jorge talked about learning letters in kindergarten. The formerly bustling classroom fell silent as students listened to each other and asked clarifying questions or made encouraging comments such as, 'I know, because my sister read to me when I was little too', and 'My mom will show the pictures and point the words for I could learn reading books'. Additionally, when students share a common goal, such as teaching their classroom canine how to read, they practise cooperative strategies and everyone can share in the effort and success. This cooperation also contributes to a sense of community (Mickelsson, 2019; Petrie, 2014), easing feelings of isolation that can accompany segregation (Ordóñez et al., 2021; Volman and 't Gilde, 2021).

When the students finished sharing their memories of learning to read, we revisited the idea of creating lesson plans. Taking Isla's suggestion, Pakuna's pals decided to write and illustrate their intentions so that everyone understood everyone else's teaching strategies. They'd have their lesson plans ready for Pakuna the following week. This level of sharing helped students to connect with, and learn about, each other as they discussed their ideas. The careful and caring discussion built community as students practised social pedagogy and taught each other about their funds of identity, the ways that they became readers and how they intended to teach Pakuna to become a reader too.

## Teaching strategies

The diversity of these teaching strategies mirrored the diversity of the ways that the children learned to read. This section includes an unedited sampling of student lesson plans just as they were written. To illustrate, Pedro wrote:

How to read with Pakuna. In order to teach Pakuna to read I will show him the pictures. And he will describe the pictures seeing them with his eyes. And pick a book out of the border. And we will read a book for him. And we will give him a turn. And we will have fun to read with pakuna.

Adella wrote, 'How I will Teach pakuna to read pakuna I will teach you. I will teach you how to read. I want you to now how to read. I want to see you how to red. I want you to read a book'. Santiago wrote, 'How I will teach Pakuna to Read I am going to put the thing on the lond. I hop you lern how to red. I will mix the wrids on the bod. I ill pomt at the wrids. I will put the chak end the x'. Catalina wrote, 'How to teach pakuna to read Hay pakuna and tary. I was tinkng how to tech you how to read. And I thot that We Shod put some un toys and put some thing that makes you foksd. So do you like this Adea? Her is a pektr'. Cairo wrote, 'How I will teach Pakuna to Read In order to teach Pakuna to Read I will teach him to do flashcard. With him and read to him. I whant to read with you if I get shy. I whant you to learn'. Fatah wrote:

How I will teach Pakuna to Read I will hlap you Read Beuces you will Read flashcard. Furthermoer we will hlap you Read flashcard and we will Read to. We will practice in are class and I thck you mit lare like that. And laddition we will read lilter book. And I will tick aboute moer stuuf to hlap pakuna.

David wrote:

How I will teach Pakuna to Read In order to teach Pakuna to read I will showe him all the words and say them 3 times and the words that are in the book say the letters that are in the book and than you haf to read the book 3 times and you will understand that only book that you red and thick you will like that book and it will ybe your favert book that you red and I hope you you like it.

These examples also demonstrate the children's various levels of English writing proficiency, as some students used a phonetic approach, spelling the words as they sounded, while other students spelled more words correctly, but most students did not consistently use conventional spelling in conjunction with the rules of English grammar, punctuation and capitalisation. The point is that each student was willing to create a lesson plan to teach Pakuna how to read, and the students read these lesson plans aloud in their small groups where ideas were shared and explained respectfully with careful attention to detail, provided via clarifying questions that allowed students to learn more about their classmates' strategies for teaching Pakuna to read.

I also modelled respectful listening and explained that we'd try everyone's ideas to see which ones might work best for Pakuna. Because no ideas were dangerous and no ideas were disqualified; thus, our reading groups were inclusive of both approaches and students teaching those approaches. Everyone was welcome. Every idea was worth a try, and we tried them all, group by group, idea by idea, as Pakuna sat attentively, encircled by his teams of teachers. Because some students remembered learning to read by listening to bedtime stories, we offered to bring in a bed for Pakuna, and that's where he met with his young teachers for the remainder of the lessons.

After we'd tried everyone's ideas, the class met together to discuss Pakuna's learning preferences. Students noted that Pakuna paid close attention to the pictures and seemed perfectly calm and focused as they had read page after page to him. I thanked the young teachers and offered to measure Pakuna's improvement so that we might discover a highly effective method to continue his lessons, but no one was willing to retest Pakuna so early in the process as evidenced by their protests of, 'Not yet. He's just starting', and 'We don't want him embarrassed again if he's not ready'. It seemed that the class knew that increasing reading skills took time and practise, and they didn't feel as though Pakuna had received adequate instruction during the initial trial of ideas. Their concern demonstrated empathy and kindness – markers of community.

After some impassioned but respectful discussion, I noted that several friends had suggested the use of flashcards, and because it was the most-named strategy, maybe they wanted to consider it as a way forward, in addition to reading aloud to their canine classmate, so the groups settled on making flashcards for Pakuna.

## Flashcards

The following week, we provided the requisite materials and each young teacher created a set of four cards with a word on one side and a picture on the other side (to show Pakuna what the word meant – like the illustrations in the invitations and the lesson plans). The next time we met in our small groups, the young teachers had completed their flashcards and were eager to share them with Pakuna and one another. Students took turns reading their flashcards and explaining the illustrations to Pakuna who paid close attention, making eye contact and wagging his tail to signal approval or perhaps to signal comprehension. It was up to the student teachers to evaluate the effectiveness of the flashcard strategy. The question we posed was, 'How will we know if Pakuna is reading some of these words? For instance, this flashcard shows the word "the" and the picture shows an arrow pointing to "the" table. How will we know if Pakuna reads "the"? How can we test his understanding after you've taught him "the"? That question led the discussion to the importance of testable words that Pakuna might need to know as a student in third grade. I repeated our questions in each group using examples from the young teachers' flashcards, which I complimented for their creativity and usefulness. These sincere compliments may have helped to build that sense of trust and community, as they demonstrated a genuine appreciation for the work that Pakuna's young teachers invested in the flashcards. I intentionally praised the process as well as the product so that I could nurture these relationships and question these teachers from a position of curiosity rather than criticism.

We talked about what made a word 'testable' and how we could use the rules of the test to determine Pakuna's outcome fairly. This discussion led the student teachers to select nouns that existed in the classroom that Pakuna could pick up, such as a stuffed hamster toy or an eraser, and verbs that Pakuna could demonstrate such as 'sit', 'stand' or 'down'. That way, the young teachers would know definitively whether Pakuna was learning from the flashcards, and they'd avoid the difficulties associated with assessing his learning words such as 'the' and 'fast', which appeared on several of the initial flashcards. At this point, the teachers decided to make new cards in support of their adjusted strategy to teach testable concepts. More supplies and more flashcards. Each group showed Pakuna

the new cards and explained the accompanying illustrations while he sat listening intently. Next, each group selected just one word, and everyone in that group made a flashcard with the chosen word. If the strategy worked, then Pakuna could learn to read four words, because we met with one group per day, Monday to Thursday. The teachers agreed to create their new flashcards before we returned to school the following week.

The student teachers were becoming experts at making flashcards for Pakuna and we carefully examined the new cards during our small group sessions. As the teachers showed their new cards to Pakuna, we began noticing something important, and so I asked if they had noticed anything special about the letters on the flashcards. To illustrate, the Monday group chose 'dog' as their word, and we laid each card in a row on the carpet in the centre of the circle surrounding Pakuna so that we could compare the formation of each letter and the composition of each dog image. This stage of the intervention is necessary because it demonstrates how individuals can contribute to a common goal and how community can aid the process. I pointed to the alphabet displayed above the big white board that we had used for Pakuna's original reading test and directed students to observe the shapes and sizes of the letters. Then, I asked one of the group members to borrow a nearby schoolbook and we all looked at the letters on a few pages, noting the remarkable uniformity from word to word – the way that every 'a' looked identical, for instance.

I asked our young friends if they thought that Pakuna might learn best using flashcards with letters like the ones in the book and on the alphabet near the white board. Luciana said that 'maybe it's a good idea to use letters like those ones for he can always know the right letter'. Each group came to similar conclusions about using uniform letters, so I promised to bring flashcards made with foam letters to depict the word for each group. The teachers agreed that these flashcards would not require pictures because Pakuna would be learning the meaning of each word using items from the classroom or actions that he already understood, so with that step accomplished, we returned the following week to share our flashcards with the groups and the teachers were ready to take Pakuna's lessons to the next level.

The student teachers approved of the flashcards that I'd constructed by gluing thick foam stencilled letters to pieces of thin yellow craft foam, but they hadn't discussed how to use the flashcards with Pakuna. It wasn't as though he could just look at the cards and know what to do, so the group members needed to work together to devise ways to teach him the meaning of each card. We'll continue our explanation with the 'dog' card. Eventually, Pakuna needed to learn that d-o-g spells dog, so that when he read that card he'd pick up his small stuffed dog and not pick up the similarly sized stuffed frog, butterfly or cat. He had to learn to read d-o-g and be able to demonstrate his knowledge satisfactorily. So, after his friends took turns reading aloud for Pakuna during the initial 30 minutes of our small group meeting, they decided to teach him to spell just as they had learned to spell, by repeating the letter sequence and associating it with the appropriate item, in this case, his little stuffed dog.

Each young teacher held up the flashcard and said, 'Pakuna, d-o-g spells dog'. Then, the teacher showed Pakuna the little stuffed dog and said, 'This is your dog'. We talked about how to praise Pakuna too so that his young teachers complimented his effort by saying, 'Great job paying attention, Pak!' Process praise is important in this stage because it takes the focus off the individual's worth (Pakuna was not a reader) and puts that focus on something that the learner can control, such as effort (Pakuna could learn to read). Because it does not isolate and evaluate the learner, process praise can also contribute to a shared sense of community. Students also shared their linguistic capital by teaching me that the word 'dog' was *perro* in Spanish just as I embraced the translations of *plata* and *vistosa*.

The next step in the learning process was to help Pakuna strengthen the association between the d-o-g flashcard and his stuffed toy dog, so his teachers took turns showing Pakuna the card and hiding his dog somewhere nearby while Pakuna watched them. Now when they showed Pakuna the flashcard, they issued the accompanying request: 'Pakuna, look. D-o-g! Find your d-o-g'. Then Pakuna would sniff search the area and return triumphantly carrying his toy dog, and his friends would congratulate him with pets and pats and other expressions of joy. When Pakuna was reliably returning with his stuffed dog, Ximena voiced a quiet concern: 'Is Pakuna learning reading or spelling?' Fair question. Ximena added that 'we keep spelling for Pak, but that's not the same like reading silently', and her colleagues agreed. The teachers suggested that we stop spelling the word and start just showing Pakuna the flashcard without saying anything 'and see if he can really read it yet'. That's precisely what happened when we came back to school the following week.

The teachers put the stuffed dog in the middle of the circle, in plain view, and one by one they silently showed Pakuna his d-o-g flashcard. To everyone's complete delight, Pakuna picked up the little



stuffed dog every time he looked at the flashcard! His teachers were so proud of him, and we thanked them all for teaching Pakuna how to read! But as Ximena mentioned, there was more to reading than merely retrieving a stuffed toy that corresponded to a flashcard. When we asked her for more details, she said that Pakuna might be starting to read, 'but what if he only knows the d-o-g card and the dog together? What if he doesn't know enough about the word?' 'Like what?' Santiago asked her. Liliana joined the conversation and reminded her colleagues that the test had many words and Pakuna had to learn more than d-o-g. He had to know not to get the eraser or the book or anything else when he read d-o-g.

## Homework

These young teachers were taking their lessons very seriously, for Pakuna's sake, and they all wanted him to pass his next test. So, we asked them how they prepared for their own tests and Adriana said, 'We do our homework and study the lesson and practise it like Pak'. 'But', I said, 'Pakaroo [one of Pakuna's many nicknames] hasn't done any homework. Do you think he should do some? Do you think it might help him learn to read if we practised at home and studied here with you too?' A unanimous and familiar chorus rose from the circle, 'Yes!' And Adriana added, 'Pakuna could do homework like us, to learn more reading words!' So, over the next week, Pakuna and I practised his flashcards just as he'd been doing in school, only I hid his dog in more challenging locations and he wasn't allowed to watch me hide his toy. He had to look at the flashcard and find the little dog without any hints. By the time that we returned to Moore Elementary School on Monday, we were ready to show his friends some progress.

Each group proceeded in a similar fashion, and so we'll continue to describe the 'dog' group activities. As had become our custom, after the student teachers had taken turns reading to Pakuna for the first half-hour of our time together, they asked for his reading materials, which we'd taken home to use during his practice sessions. Pakuna's young friends were eager to assess the effectiveness of their strategy of assigning him the homework and they were happy to put him through his paces, but first, the teachers reassured Pakuna that he needn't be nervous. Carlos told Pakuna, 'Okay, we're not testing you, just checking your homework.' Camila began by silently showing him the flashcard after Santiago hid the little stuffed dog toy while Pakuna was preoccupied with some of his teachers who were showing him another book so that the other children could secretly hide his toy. The young teachers reminded Pakuna of the rules for demonstrating his learning, and then the first teacher silently showed Pakuna the d-o-g flashcard, and everyone waited without a word, almost holding our breath, as Pakuna stood staring at the flashcard. It seemed like an eternity before he began to look around the circle – and then it happened. Pakuna left the circle and began searching the classroom. He discovered his stuffed dog napping on the teacher's chair, so Pakuna gently scooped up the little dog and brought him back to the centre of the circle where his friends nearly forgot their classroom decorum as they shouted words of congratulations. Camila said, 'Pakuna, you did it! You got the dog! You read the card!' Carlos concurred, 'You did it, Pak! You can read d-o-g! That's your first learning word, and you did it!'

This scenario replayed with each student teacher, in every group. According to his teachers, Pakuna's homework had made a big difference in his reading level, and we thanked them for working with him so patiently and enthusiastically.

## Pakuna's post-test

With his homework checked, Pakuna faced the final test, the real determination of his reading skills – he had to understand that d-o-g spells dog even when the dog appeared in a line of other similarly sized, textured and shaped objects – under the identical conditions of that first test when he examined the line of classroom items as his, then new, friend invigilated the exam by pointing at the list of words on the board at the front of the classroom. If Pakuna could distinguish the objects this way, then he'd be a real reader, just like his young friends, just like his teachers, but how could we teach Pakuna to demonstrate his knowledge so precisely? Was it even possible? And, could he conquer his initial embarrassment and accurately convey his knowledge? Those were the questions that I posed in the reading groups. The students all acknowledged Pakuna's progress. Pedro said, 'If Pakaroo keeps working, he can learn anything! He can even learn everything in reading!' Pedro's colleagues agreed wholeheartedly. Not one student questioned Pakuna's potential. It was a remarkable show of unity and support while recognising

the value of persistence and effort, two changeable, controllable factors that Pakuna was learning to regulate as evidenced by his substantial improvement following his homework assignments.

I reflected the praise back onto the student teachers, reminding them that they had designed each lesson and taught Pakuna all he knew about reading so far. They were the instructors who were teaching him to read, step by step. Their encouragement was the reason that Pakuna wanted to read, the reason that he finished his homework on time. His incremental and ultimate success was nothing less than a shared accomplishment. It was crucial that students accepted their responsibility in this process and understood the importance of their individual and collective contributions to Pakuna's progress. Acknowledging responsibility valued each person's impact on Pakuna's reading improvement, directly enhancing a sense of belonging. Students' cultural capital increased as they created an environment where cooperation counted, and full participation provided the means to achieve these remarkable results. These discussions placed the student teachers at the centre of the experience, where they were valued as integral members of a unique community of care and cooperation (Mickelsson, 2019), where they cultivated a reading relationship with Pakuna based on their own funds of identity. They used their empowered status as readers to help Pakuna become a reader too. And now they all faced the final questions together, no longer a disparate group of marginalised semi-students but as a team of teachers whose methods had crossed species boundaries to change one learner's reading level.

From this perspective, once Pakuna had demonstrated his reading skill improvement, ostensibly because he followed his teachers' instructions and completed his homework, the young teachers turned their full attention towards meeting their common goal of ensuring that the classroom canine really could read. With just a few weeks remaining, we continued meeting with our small groups. Each day, the student teachers would begin in their traditional way, taking turns reading aloud to Pakuna and petting him as he fell fast asleep during this part of the lesson. Rather than expressing disappointment that he would fall asleep, the students routinely remarked that Pakuna was correctly interpreting these narratives as bedtime stories, and falling asleep was the expected result of their successful reading, so his snoring sounds and dreaming motions encouraged their participation, and they reported joy and satisfaction with their own reading skills. For example, Adriana said, 'Pakuna hears the story like me when I was little, so that's good to him. He can know the story, then he can read it.'

When that first half-hour had elapsed, Pakuna woke up, ready to concentrate on his flashcard lessons, which were advancing with each session. Now that Pakuna could find the stuffed dog wherever his teachers hid it, they were ready for the final phase of the programme. The first step was to show Pakuna his little toy dog and his d-o-g flashcard as one of his friends would remind him that, 'd-o-g spells dog, Pakuna'. Then, they put the dog toy into a pile of other similar toys and showed him the flashcard in silence. One student in each group kept track, and Pakuna succeeded about half of the time, but his teachers were not convinced that such a score signalled true reading proficiency, as Liliana's comment indicated: 'Half might be guessing. Pakuna needs 100 per cent correct like us.' Valeria suggested more homework might help Pakuna, and we agreed to practise and promised to follow their instructions so that Pakuna could look at the d-o-g flashcard and find his toy dog with greater accuracy. And that's precisely what we did. Pakuna came back to school prepared for his reading tests. One teacher in each group administered these final exams and Pakuna passed every time. Practise had once again proven a valuable strategy, but his student teachers had proven to be the most helpful resources of all. We thanked them and celebrated together as they clapped and cheered and said, 'We're dog teachers!', 'No, we're Pakuna's teachers!', 'We're reading teachers!', 'We're great teachers!' – we all agreed.

## Reflections and implications

By this time, the students who were marginalised had become 'cool', the only third-graders with a dog in their classroom, and now this dog could read because they had taught him how. The experience was transformational for Pakuna and something that his young friends remember to this day. Fatah discovered confidence by realising that he could read better than Pakuna. He and his classmates increased their vocabulary as we co-defined words for Pakuna's benefit. The young teachers nurtured community by sharing their experiences of learning to read and their strategies for teaching Pakuna. They listened carefully, practised literacy skills and worked towards a common goal. And they succeeded by every measure.

Although these student teachers may not have had much reason to think that working with Pakuna might affect their educational outcomes, our approach was theoretically based on human–animal interaction (Connell et al., 2019; Gee et al., 2017; Levinson et al., 2017; Mickelsson, 2019), social pedagogy (Johnston et al., 2015) and research on funds of knowledge (Llopart and Esteban-Guitart, 2017, 2018) and identity (Hogg and Volman, 2020) with marginalised students in subtractive schooling environments (Ordóñez et al., 2021; Valenzuela, 2005). We were therefore optimistic about providing the experience and encouraged by the results. As one common critique of human–animal interaction studies that involve children reading to dogs is that generally the processes are not well-described (Connell et al., 2019), I endeavoured to remedy that concern by providing thorough descriptions so that other researchers could replicate and expand on these methods. This work also contributes to the research on funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart and Moll, 2014) by linking the power of the human–animal bond to young children’s views of themselves as learners and teachers.

This work contributes to the research on social pedagogy and classroom community by focusing on Pakuna’s reading skill as a correlate to the children’s teaching skills, so that each child was elevated from student to teacher and Pakuna became the official learner. As students took turns reading aloud, I’d routinely ask, ‘Who can find a word on this page that Pakuna might not understand?’, as opposed to asking the students, ‘Are there any words here that you don’t understand?’ This assets-based approach allowed students to identify unfamiliar words that we could define together for Pakuna and no human student expressed embarrassment in the process. As Sadie commented, ‘I didn’t know that word too. Now I know it with Pakuna.’ That community protects marginalised students from isolation and they feel more welcome at school – accomplishing our original goal.

An additional goal of this writing is to encourage scholars to examine the links between social pedagogy and human–animal interaction by translating these experiences into supportive practices that create a welcoming and empowering environment valuing students’ funds of knowledge and identity and counteracting the effects of linguisticism. In the United States, students read for information beginning in the third grade, and so reading aloud to a dog in school makes sense because young students do not feel judged in the process (Binfet and Kiehlstrand Hartwig, 2019) and they can concentrate on comprehension rather than focus on fluency. Teaching a dog to read is a language-intensive activity that can empower students to practise the fundamental skills that they are teaching (Levinson et al., 2017) – and practice leads to improvement, as Pakuna’s post-test results demonstrated. Thus, incorporating a canine into the language and literacy curriculum may be particularly beneficial for non-native speakers.

This case study employed many basic tenets of social pedagogy: creating relationships, using a strengths-based framework, encouraging the community to define and solve issues and providing support for these activities rather than directing the activities or imposing solutions. Social pedagogy, in this case, happened in the context of young students who had been segregated based on their language, as they had the opportunity to co-construct a classroom community by integrating a therapy dog into their literacy lessons, reading to him, teaching him to read and teaching themselves about valuing each other’s ideas and working together towards the uncommon goal of educating and elevating a therapy dog to become a literate cross-breed Retriever. As Pakuna learned to read, his young teachers learned how much they loved him and wanted to support his success, just as he loved and supported each of them. That unique relationship helps make the case for including research on human–animal interaction in the context of social pedagogy (Bone, 2013; Johnston et al., 2015).

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## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the Internal Review Board at Arizona State University.

### Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently blind the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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