

The value of the Pet Pep program

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ABSTRACT

The PetPEP program is an educational resource designed for use in the primary schools at lower, middle and upper levels. This paper reports the preliminary results of an evaluation of the program which was commissioned by the Australian Veterinary Association. The study required a triangulated approach involving surveys of all children in selected schools which took part in the study and interviews of teachers, parents and children. Preliminary results revealed that the program offers benefits for teachers and children particularly at Lower Primary level.

INTRODUCTION

The Pets and People Education Program (Pet PEP) has been developed by the Australian Veterinary Association to enhance children's understanding of animals and to assist schools to incorporate learning about pets and other animals into curriculum programs. The program was also designed to assist the achievement of outcomes in a number of national curriculum profiles such as the Curriculum Statements and Profiles for Australian Schools. It links closely with state and territory curriculum documents.

The kit is divided into three sections: Lower Primary, Middle Primary and Upper Primary. Three themes run through the kit: preparing for my pet; caring for my pet; and being a responsible pet owner. Although Science based, Pet Pep is fully integrated with other learning areas such as English, Studies of Society and Environment, Health and Physical Education plus Technology, Mathematics and the Arts.

The beginning of each section of the kit contains an overview of the contents linked to learning areas and selected appropriate outcomes from the Curriculum Profiles for Australian Schools. Each of the sections contains ten topics related to the three themes. Each topic varies in length from one or two lessons to a week or more. The topics each contain a range of activities covering the skills and concepts from a number of learning areas. Excursions are included throughout each section.

The kit also contains a Teacher Resource section and Teacher Contact section. The Teacher Resource section contains information concerning general pet care for all common species of pets, keeping a classroom pet and a list of suggested reference books. The Teacher Contact section contains details of individuals and groups who may be contacted for further information, excursions or school visits and details of participating veterinarians, municipal animal control officers, animal welfare groups, animal conservation groups animal special interest groups, animals working in the community and wildlife parks. Pet PEP also encourages contact with various groups in the community such as senior citizens, the Guide Dog Association, dog obedience clubs, Local Government Dog Control officers and Rangers, veterinarians, animal welfare and conservation groups.

In the latter half of 1995 the Australian Veterinary Association engaged the Centre for Research in Science, Technology and Environmental Education (CRISTEE) in a summative evaluation of the PET PEP program as an educational resource. In February 1996 the Centre for Professional and Vocational Education (PAVE) was invited to conduct the evaluation under the guidance of a designated steering committee comprising CRISTEE members and members of the Australian Veterinary Association.

The goal of the PET PEP program evaluation was to determine the educational value of the program. The educational evaluation was thought to consist of two main aspects:

- the learning outcomes for children participating in the program; and
- teachers' implementation and valuing of the program.

METHOD

The complex nature of the project required a triangulated methodology to assess the effectiveness of the PetPEP program. The methodology was a predominantly qualitative design incorporating quantitative elements. Approximately 200 children were surveyed using a pre- and post-design at both Lower (120 children) and Middle/Upper levels (75 children) of the selected primary schools. In addition, three middle/upper and four lower primary teachers were interviewed using continuous assessment at the beginning, middle and end of the implementation of the program. Seven parent and seven children interviews are currently being conducted at the completion of the program.

The two surveys and interview schedules were designed by conducting a content analysis of the program. Repeating themes occurred along three major dimensions. These dimensions and their aspects are as follows: considerations in pet selection; animal human relationships; and responsibilities of pet owners. The first dimension, considerations in pet selection, included content areas such as distinctions between wildlife and pets; history of domestication; relative advantages of different animals as pets; fit between animal and environment; fit between animal size and exercise needed. The second dimension, animal human relationships, included content on relative life spans and effects of pets on the elderly and children. The third dimension, responsibilities of pet owners, included hygiene; health of pets; awareness of vets; welfare of pets; control of pets (knowledge of training strategies); and identification of needs of pets.

The items selected for the surveys and interviews assessed knowledge and attitudinal and behavioural change along the above dimensions. The selection of items was constrained by the frequency of repeating themes and the evaluators' expectations about children's prior knowledge. As a result, the Steering Committee specified five lessons for both Middle/Upper and Lower where repetition of themes was greatest and where more novel knowledge was covered. These were selected by the evaluation team primarily because they covered information that would not normally be available to the children.

Where possible matching items assessing the same dimensions were selected to provide parallel forms of the survey for Lower and Middle/Upper. However there was insufficient time and resources to develop and validate parallel forms of the test so the two surveys must be treated as separate items for evaluation purposes.

Both Surveys were trialed with a lower primary class of 34 children and another group of Upper Primary children at a composite private School. The surveys were then adjusted in language and level of difficulty to the appropriate levels.

Criteria for selection of children and parents for interview included both representative and purposive sampling considerations. Proportional representation by gender and level (lower and Middle/Upper) as well as purposive sampling of the extent and nature of any observed changes by the teacher were made. Children who did not seem amenable to the program were also included.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Survey results. Preliminary results from the PetPEP Survey indicate significant increases between pre-test and post-tests at Lower Primary levels and Middle to Upper Primary levels along the majority of specified dimensions.

Knowledge of considerations for pet selection. At the Lower Primary level pre-test and post-test differences (see Table 1) show that there was no significant difference for this dimension. However, at the Middle/Upper levels there was a significant increase for a similar question requiring children to specify all the criteria needed for selecting a dog as a pet (see Table 2). Moreover, at this level, there was more discernment and discrimination by post-test in the quality of answers showing children grasped a greater range and finer level of the considerations.

Table 1: Differences between pre-test and post-test scores on dimensions of the lower Primary Pet PEP Survey (n=120).

Dimensions	M		SD		t value
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	
Knowledge of considerations for pet selection	5.97	5.93	1.58	1.81	0.27
Knowledge of animal human relationships	1.62	1.93	0.31	0.10	5.86*
Knowledge of responsibilities of pet owners - multiple choice - free recall	1.73	1.88	0.22	0.13	1.68*
	3.65	4.4	2.62	2.97	4.68*
Children's attitudes to responsibilities of pet owners - positive - negative					
	3.03 0.51	3.50 0.76	3.04 0.61	3.61 1.31	2.46* 1.98*

a. Two tailed probabilities are reported
b. $p < .05$

Table 2: Differences between pretest and post test scores on dimensions of the Middle/Upper Primary Pet PEP Survey (n=76).

Dimensions		M	D	SD	t value
		Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Knowledge of considerations for pet selection	2.37	4.01	1.86	13.08	8.20*
Knowledge of animal human relationships	1.76	2.68	0.97	2.75	5.11*
Attitudes towards animal human relationships	11.09	11.78	7.39	6.26	2.27*
Knowledge of responsibilities of pet owners - multiple choice - free call					
	2.41 4.18	2.51 5.13	1.02 2.33	1.30 2.33	0.67 4.85*
Children's attitudes to responsibilities - positive - negative					
	3.52 0.67	4.22 0.86	3.05 1.10	3.38 1.65	3.18* 1.25

a. Two tailed probabilities are reported
b. $p < .05$

Knowledge/attitudes of animal human relationships. Both Lower Primary and Middle/Upper levels children showed a significant improvement by post-test in the question assessing knowledge of treatment of animals in the dimension concerning animal human relationships. Lower Primary classes showed a marked increase at lower levels to more pet-centred answers for the question asking for a list of reasons for why pets would like people whereas at pre-test the answers were more human centred. At post- test for Middle/Upper Primary there did not seem to be any shift on the attitudinal aspect of this dimension.

Knowledge and attitudes of responsibilities of pet owners. There were significant improvements for Lower Primary along the dimension concerning the knowledge and attitudes of responsibilities of pet owners (see Table 1). At Upper Primary children's results were equivocal. Pre-test post-test differences were not significant for multiple choice items assessing this item. However, significant differences were found for free recall items assessing the same dimension. There was a significant increase in both positive and negative attitudes towards tasks needed to take care of pets for Lower Primary and an increase in positive but not negative attitudes for children at Middle/Upper Primary.

Teachers' interview results. Generally the results of the teachers interviews were that teachers thought the program was well structured, easy to follow and easy to use. The level of language and activity was on the whole well pitched although one teacher reported that some of the lower primary worksheets were not appropriate for the children's developmental level. Her comments indicated that too much writing was needed, repetition occurred and that modification according to children's literacy levels was needed. The kit provided a good basis for those teachers who did not want to do a lot in order to design or conduct the sessions. One teacher commented that the Lower Primary School program was so popular that the school should develop a policy on when PetPep is taught - perhaps Grades 1,3 and 5 in order to avoid duplication.

Despite the adequacy of the kit's contents for planning, many teachers were imaginative in their use of the program, augmenting the content with a number of activities. One class conducted a pet parade involving the whole school which proved to be a great success with parents' attendance and a follow-up write up in the School newsletter. Thought needed to be given for children who do not own pets. One teacher commented that there is a need to involve children who do not own pets by providing them with activities. In relation to other aspects of the kit, teachers said that they found the Teacher Information sheets useful and liked teacher contacts such as the RSPCA, pet shop visits, obedience school and vets. Remaining parent and children interviews are still to be analysed.

DISCUSSION

As all data from the study have not been gathered and analysed, any analysis and interpretation would be premature. Therefore conclusions will be presented during the Conference presentation. However two points can be made on the basis of recurrent themes that have emerged from the study to date. These chiefly concerns the survey results and teacher interviews although, in the case of the survey results, confidence in the conclusions must be reserved for the results of statistical analyses.

Overall the program seemed successful for teachers and the lower primary classes seemed to show more marked increases in knowledge and improvement in attitudes on the results of the survey and interviews. There a probably a number of reasons, not all concerning the program, that are relevant here. These will be explored during the presentation as well as the results and discussion from the additional data still waiting to be gathered.

Recognition of the very great contribution of the evaluation team needs to be made in relation to this study. The team comprised Margaret Knott, Kate Wisdom, Gemma Friedlieb and Suzi Chamberlain.

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