

**Perspectives of Youth in an Animal-Centered Correctional Vocational Program:
A Qualitative Evaluation of Project Pooch**

Kate Davis, M.S.W.

Research conducted while affiliated with
Portland State University's Graduate School of Social Work

Introduction

Project Pooch is a canine-centered vocational educational program located at an Oregon juvenile correctional facility for male offenders. Dogs that are facing euthanasia or prolonged shelter care are selected by Project Pooch staff for placement at Project Pooch's on-site kennel. The dogs are then prepared for adoption by the incarcerated residents. These residents, who once hired are recognized as employees of Project Pooch, are also given the responsibility to groom, train and present each dog for adoption. They work as part of a team of kennel staff, and are trained in animal health, behavior and adoption promotion. Project Pooch is the only vocational program at the study site that provides residents with the opportunity to interact with non-human animals. Unlike some prison programs, the dogs do not live with their caretakers, but do have regular contact with the youth assigned to care for them.

This qualitative research study provides insight into the experiences of the 14 youth who participated in the study. Their responses cannot be construed to be applicable to all participants of this or similar programs; however, the findings in this study appear to be similar to findings emerging from a growing body of literature pertaining to animal facilitated programs in correctional settings (Strimple, 2003; Furst, 2005; Turner, 2007). In this evaluation, participating youth described developing patience, experiencing an emotional connection with dogs in the program and developing practical employment skills including improved communication with staff, peers and people from the outside community.

Methods

Accessing the facility and designing the instrument

Project Pooch is housed within an Oregon youth correctional facility. After describing the purpose of the study and the protections that would be put in place for the participants, permission was granted by appropriate authorities to proceed. The superintendent at the time met personally with me and expressed interest and support for the project, and also provided a detailed and useful context for the current treatment and rehabilitation goals of the facility (personal conversations Gary Lawhead, 2002). Additionally, the study was reviewed and approved by the H.S.R.B. of Portland State University.

I approached this study using both ethnographic tools and qualitative research methods. The blending of these two perspectives in research potentially maximizes the empowerment of the study participant with the researcher bringing a spirit and method of ignorance and inquisitiveness (Leigh, 1998) is that of being an authority on the subject being studied. This appeared to be the case, as the youth interviewed were forthcoming, informative, relaxed and talkative.

Prior to designing and initiating formal interviews with youth, I and a student assistant conducted ethnographic interviews and focus groups with youth and staff, identifying “cover terms” and “descriptors” (Leigh, 1998) that would allow us to maximize familiarity with the context in which Project Pooch operates. These contacts also helped us get to know staff and inmates, which allowed for comfortable access to residents’ cottages and staff meeting areas for interviews. This access also permitted the researcher to observe interactions between youth and peers and staff.

Visiting all areas of the campus also afforded the experience of the physical and psychological aspects of behavioral and movement restraints within a correctional facility. On one occasion, this researcher participated in a “count”, in which inmates count off in numbers so that an accurate accounting of whereabouts is made. Momentarily forgetting my setting, when the count came to my place in the line, the end of the line, I shouted out my age. The guard chastised me, appropriately, and reminded me that this is an important way that safety and structure are maintained in the institution. This was also in keeping with the structure of walking two by two when walking along the campus. These experiences provided insight into the contrast between the settings on cottage and Project Pooch: on cottage the setting is physically large and there are more youth to be supervised, compared to Project Pooch, where smaller groups of youth are active within a contained setting.

Because this study included field work and observation in multiple settings, I was able to observe youth interacting with staff, peers, dogs and occasionally people from the outside or “the outs”. I also had the opportunity to conduct formal interviews with staff and to participate in activities at the correctional facility. Following the initial focus groups and interviews, an extensive interview survey was developed. Questions were designed to provide Project Pooch with participants’ evaluation of the program and to provide information about the participants’ overall description of the emotional and vocational experiences of the program. An initial copy of the survey was given to two participants for feedback before administering the interview for the study.

Sample

This was a convenience sample of 14 participants. Many potential participants were employed at Project Pooch during a period of six months, where all current participants were invited to participate in interviews. Flyers were distributed to the residential cottages and were left at Project Pooch as well. There was some observed “snowball” effect as some participants encouraged their friends to participate. Others chose to participate after being in a focus group or being referred by the director of the program. This is a weakness of the study, as one can’t know who chose not to participate and why they chose not to participate. It is also a small sample size.

Youth who were interviewed ranged in age from 17-22. The average age was 19. Participants had been in Oregon Youth Authority Custody for an average of two years, with a range of one month to almost five years. Interview participants had been at Pooch from three weeks to seventeen months, the average being six months.

Ethnicity of participants:

Multiple Identities, non-white: 1

African American: 1

Latino: 2

Native American: 2

Caucasian/ "White": 8

Interviews

Interviews with individual youth were conducted in private areas of either residential cottages or a private area at Project Pooch. Most interviews lasted an hour and a half, and responses were written down verbatim. Probes were utilized when participants were not forthcoming; however, most participants were eager to converse about their experiences and opinions.

The interview used with the youth participants consists of 31 questions. Thirteen questions were selected for analysis on the basis of their relevance to relationships with people and dogs, communication with people, descriptions of inter-personal functioning and personal assessment of skill development. Excluded questions were those questions that specifically pertained to the daily operations of Project Pooch.

Analysis

I initially completed a content analysis of responses to each question. Themes were preliminarily identified based upon frequency of occurrence within the text of the interviews. Three individual readers, not associated with the project, were given copies of the interview responses and were asked to identify themes that they observed, using the same technique of recording the frequency of certain responses to each question. In group and individual sessions, the readers and I reviewed our findings and found consistency among the themes identified in each question area.

In the second portion of the analysis I reviewed the complete text of all of the responses to the thirteen questions multiple times, extracting potential global themes. The principal investigator then completed a content analysis recording frequency of occurrence of pre-selected terms. The content analysis was then reviewed with an independent reader who had identified these themes as well.

Results

Themes in response to each question
--

Thinking about other youth, who is most likely to get the most out of this program?

Participants identified that the best candidate is someone who is “willing to learn”, who is mature.

Is working at Project Pooch like you thought it would be? In what ways?

Participants stated that they thought it would be harder, thought it would be easier. Most stated that they learned more than they thought they would.

What do you feel you have learned about yourself from your experiences at Project Pooch?

Participants reported that they learned that they have patience and that they can teach what they learn.

What employment skills have you gained from your participation at Project Pooch, if any?

Grooming and animal training were equally represented, with interview skills following closely behind that.

Does working at Project Pooch give you opportunities to work on your treatment goals? If yes, how?

Participants cited developing patience and relationship skills.

What type of relationship(s) do you have or have you had with dog(s) at Project Pooch?

Participants noted that they were both teacher and friend to their assigned dog, depending upon the circumstances.

What do you feel you have gained or learned from this relationship, if anything?

Patience, learning from animal about emotions and behavior were most frequently noted by participants.

Has your relationship with the dogs changed at all since you started at Project Pooch?

Youth note that they become more attached to the dogs as time goes on and they report relating to the dog as an actual companion, rather than being “just a dog”.

How, if at all, has your relationship with the dog(s) at Project Pooch affected your relationship with other youth at Institution?

Although more youth stated that there was not a change, half of them went on to discuss how they can talk to peers at Pooch about their dogs, and interact in ways that they could not talk to peers at their cottage.

Have your relationships with other youth at Institution changed at all since you started working at Project Pooch? If so, please describe how.

Half say yes, half say no. Described same as above

Have your relationships with staff at Institution changed at all since you started working at Project Pooch? If so, please describe how.

Overall, yes. Youth describe an experience of sharing knowledge and mutual appreciation for dogs with staff.

Project Pooch is:

**__All treatment__ More Treatment __Equally Treatment and Work __
More Work __ All Work**

Youth describe that Pooch is a place where you can apply the things you've learned in treatment, but it is not a treatment program. The program is seen predominantly as equally treatment and work. All responses clearly identified the lack of clarity regarding the question of "what is treatment", which is reflective of confusion that can accompany treatment planning in juvenile institutions (Inderbitzin, 2007) and which coincided with my own observations.

**In what ways, if any, has being part of Project Pooch affected your personality?
On a scale of 1-10 0=no change at all, 5=I've changed a little in this area,
10=I've changed 100% in this area.**

Averages

Patience **8.5**

Empathy **6.1**

Anger Management **6.25**

Self-Discipline **6.0**

Self-Esteem **3.75**

Attitude Towards Authority **3.2**

Relationship With People On the Outs **4.5**

Youth reported only positive changes. If youth reported no change or reported that they had that skill already, the response was counted as 0 but included in the overall count for averaging purposes.

Global Themes

Patience and responsibility

"That I didn't have as much patience as I thought I did- like sometimes she's not doing stuff right, in the afternoon she do it right. I see that I can be patient, teach her how to be and I don't have to yell- just be patient."

"I'm more patient than I thought I was. I wake up knowing I will see my dog. I make rawhide on cottage; this guy he buys raw material and I'll make it for him (dog) and stuff."

"A lot of patience- because she's stubborn. We could be walking and all of a sudden she stops and I'd pull her at first, that's not good. Then the dog, she don't like that. She starts rolling around and she'd see it's fun – she stops. Now I nudge her. When she falls down, I'll pick her up."

"Yeah., because when I first started, we didn't have a relationship, but now we have to be there. Feeding, grooming, obedience."

"Used to look at dogs like 'can you fetch?' Now I kind of look at dogs like a person. They need help. See they are just like people."

“Yeah. I’ve learned a lot of things like as in, how to care for dogs, like grooming, training. Gained a lot of patience. Learned how to care for another person. My dogs are like my closest friends.”

Developing a Relationship

“Great. I don’t understand the whole bonding thing. Don’t see much point in bonding when you have to pass them on. It’ll take a couple before I’m used to passing them on. I’ve been bonding with out thinking of it. He’s already close to me.”

“Business and companion. When I get a dog, I know pretty much where they came from. With new Pooch dogs, I wonder where they’re coming from. I feel for cuts, bruises, wonder where they have been. You get attached. Happy when they get us dogs, though.”

“...At first hadn’t any interactions with dogs in seven years. Used to think dogs were just dogs sitting out in the yard and a friend.”

“It’s like a real good relationship. I like my dog. My dog likes me. It’s like kid going to college, real sad. I didn’t come yesterday. I had thought she was leavin’...she was still here. We took pictures. You get real attached to the dogs.”

“How much a dog can love you, depends on you. How much you could mean to somebody else. All my life I’ve been used a lot- for custody, teachers pass me on. Dogs just love you.”

Work Skills

Learning and Teaching

“I have the ability to teach, not just the dogs, but others about what I do.”

“I never knew so much about dogs. You learn body positions and can prevent things from happening.”

“Learned how to use positive/negative reinforcement. Good for us to forget about everything else and good for dogs if they have been abused.”

“Learning more about myself. Where my social skills are, how I feel about acting more assertive. Learning how to act assertive and not feeling like I’m hurting someone and being an idiot.”

“Personally, me, it helps me on treatment goals. Like on Cottage here we deal with family issues, which leads to crime, here leads to future. This job is like a real job- like you’re on the outside working. Grandma died. Now when I think of it, I messed up, she’s looking down on me. This is something that will help me be a good family man, a decent man, everything my family wasn’t. Be what my grandma dreamed for me.”

Communication/Social Skills

“Helps me specifically to learn to work with people. Thought people were all manipulative and out to hurt me. So I can relate to people not from treatment to work on this.”

“Yes. I’m more open, more willing to talk with staff-where before it was ‘I gotta do what he says because he’s the authority figure, but I don’t want anything to do with him’”

“The youth that had her before me was frustrated with her and when I got her I taught her to lie down, and the previous owner says “dumb mutt”, but he also wants to know how I did it. Because I have a relationship with her.”

“We got dogs, they got dogs, so we talk about it. Compare training techniques.”
(regarding staff)

“Learning more about myself. Where my social skills are, how I feel about acting more assertive. Learning how to act assertive and not feeling like I’m hurting someone and being an idiot.”

“Yes. By becoming a new person. You got to change your old ways. 2 years ago- I would’ve been smoking out in back. I’ve matured. “Blank” (treatment professional) makes you think of who you are, what you used to be. I like to be the guy who greets everyone. ‘I like that guy.’ I can put my street knowledge into the dogs.”

Technical skills

“Computer skills. Flyers. Advertising. Researching, study about the dogs. My very first dog bit someone. I read about (the breed) that they were stubborn to train, and ways to get around it. The dog went on to be a guard dog”.

“Interviews, public speaking, grooming, training, kennel worker, computer, responsibility, leadership.”

“Helps with talking with people from the outside. Institutional people have a hard time with that. Maybe regular business skills.”

Discussion

The youth involved in this evaluation, with the exception of one participant, described experiences that are characteristic of having a sense of personal agency. In an article on altruistic coping, Toch (2000) provides insight into agency by way of describing an inmate crew photographed after helping an elderly man chop and stack his wood, noting that the men are “...publicly presented (and able to define themselves) as capable of contributing to the world instead of waiting for their sentences to expire”(p. 271) . As one of the Pooch participants said “Yeah. I’ve learned a lot of things like as in, how to

care for dogs, like grooming, training. Gained a lot of patience. Learned how to care for another person. My dogs are like my closest friends.” Throughout the interviews, the youth emphasized their experience in doing, teaching and learning. Accompanying this was the stated experience of relationships with the dogs and vicariously through the dogs with other people.

Interviewing and hiring youth employees, being responsible for a dog, and running the kennel as a member of a team requires participants to actively coordinate together in the management of a project. This kind of movement is not characteristic of institution living overall, where movements are generally closely supervised and directions are to be closely followed. In an interview study of 144 incarcerated youths, Lane (2002) found that youth reported that the juvenile correctional programs that had the most impact on them were those that had provided something to them, i.e., life skills training and counseling made a difference to the youth in terms of changing their attitudes and behavior. This is consistent with the experiences reported by the youth in this study.

The dogs in the program appear to serve as a conduit for learning and communicating, and as such a conduit for self-efficacy. Youth describe learning from their dogs and learning from other youth about dog care or training. They describe their pleasure at being able to teach something, and to prepare a dog for adoption which not only means training the dog, but adequately presenting the dog as a potential adoptee. The youth clearly enjoy the companionship of their dogs and report a sense of comfort and relationship and learning with the animals.

Summary and Recommendations

The process of understanding and defining the animal-human relationship continues to deepen and mature (Beck, A.M. & Katcher, A. 2003; Hines, 2003; Melson, 2001 & Serpell, J.A., 2000). Practitioners who bring humans and non-human animals together for therapeutic purposes and researchers who are interested in defining that experience continue to attempt to define practices and to accurately measure the effects of animal assisted interventions (Delta Society, 1995; Fine, A.H., 2000; Kruger, K.A., Trachtenberg, S.W. & Serpell, J.A., 2004). In essence, the questions asked about animal assisted interventions have been “does it work” and “how do we know it works” and “what is ‘it’?”

Perhaps an additional set of questions, driven by the values of human dignity and humane animal care, are needed for assessing the effectiveness of animal facilitated correctional programs. When an evaluator approaches a program for which one goal is to place animals in adoptive homes, the program can produce a list of adopted animals. Does that aspect of the program work? It does. Evaluations of animal assisted correction programs seem to indicate that the incarcerated residents gain many benefits from their participation (Merriam-Arduini, 2000; Turner, 2002; Strimple, 2005). If the question is whether these programs are beneficial for incarcerated participants as they participate in it, the answer seems to be “yes”.

Animal behaviorists know that a dog that is engaged in purposive work and interaction, whether it is being companionable or chasing sheep, is a dog that is likely to display fewer behavioral difficulties. Humans also seem to need a level of engagement in meaningful, self-directed activity to meet our maximum potential (Kirschenbaum, H. & Henderson, V. L. 1990; Houchins, 2001; Maslow, 2005). This is certainly the case for still-developing incarcerated youth who are trying to complete their task of transitioning into adulthood from inside the walls of an institution (Altschuler & Brash, 2004). On the occasions when animal welfare advocates and human rights advocates find that they have a shared interest in providing humane care to all living creatures, despite their offenses, there exists the potential for a powerful alliance to influence reformation of care for sheltered dogs and for incarcerated individuals.

Although correctional institutions serve as an agent of social control (Jacobs and Steele, 1975;) and there is continuing debate about how those incarcerated should be treated (Inderbitzin, 2007a), there continues to be an effort to prepare the youth for life as a responsible adult from inside the institution (Houchins, 2001; Altschuler & Brash, 2004). Although animal facilitated programs do not fall in line with some community members' views of punishment, animal facilitated programs have served to provide opportunities for work and engagement for the youth. Additionally, static variables in recidivism may include access to education and learning how to utilize leisure time appropriately (Cottle, et. al. 2001), both of which appear to be present as opportunities in Project Pooch.

It appears that the animals and the youth share similar dilemmas: each group needs to be cared for, rehabilitated and integrated into a community. The youth are placed into a locked facility which proposes to reform, rehabilitate and consequate them according to state laws. Shelter animals are placed in a secure facility, with the hope that the dogs will be placed in a home and will avoid euthanasia. The animals and the youth spend extended amounts of time in these facilities, facing an uncertain outcome. Perhaps Furst (2006, p. 425) in her review of Prison Based Animal Programs (PAPs) presents the potential for these programs best:

Given all that is wrong with our prisons, the possibility of PAPs being identified as reliable and effective treatment is alluring. Not only could some of the more than 2 million incarcerated people benefit, but programs that pair inmates with homeless animals make it possible to help an inordinate number of animals as well. Homeless animals and prison inmates are both "throwaway populations," discarded by a society that cares not what happens to them (and prefers they be kept out of sight). Having inmates and animals help each other in a symbiotic relationship results in a win-win-win situation, with not only the inmate and animal benefiting but the larger community as well.

References

- Altschuler, D.M & Brash, R. (2004). Adolescent and Teenage Offenders: Confronting the Challenges and Opportunities of Reentry. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice* 2, 72-87.
- Beck, A.M. & Katcher, A (2003). Future directions in human-animal bond research. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 47, 1, 79-93.
- Britton, D. M. & Button, A. (2005). Prison pups: Assessing the effects of dog training programs in correctional facilities. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 9(4), 79-95. Abstract Retrieved November 15, 2007 from CSA Social Services Abstracts database.
- Cottle, C.C., Lee, R.J., & Heilbrun, K. (2001). The Prediction of Criminal Recidivism in Juveniles: A Meta-Analysis. *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 28 (3), 367-394.
- Delta Society (1997). *Animal Assisted Therapy. Therapeutic Interventions*. Renton, WA: Delta Society.
- Fine, A.H.(ed.)(2000). *Handbook on Animal Assisted Therapy. Theoretical foundations and guidelines for practice*. California: Harcourt.
- Furst, G. (2006). Prison-Based Animal Programs: A National Survey. *The Prison Journal* 86 (4), 407-430.
- Hines, L.M. (2003). Historical Perspectives on the Human Animal Bond. *American Behavioral Scientist* 47 (7), 7-15.
- Houchins, D.E. (2001). Developing the Self-Determination of Incarcerated Students. *Journal of Correctional Education* 52 (4), 141-149.
- Inderbitzin, M. (2007)a. A Look From the Inside: Balancing Custody and Treatment in a Juvenile Maximum-Security Facility. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 51 (3), pp. 348-362.
- Inderbitzin, M. (2007)b. Inside a maximum security juvenile training school: Institutional attempts to redefine the American Dream and 'normalize' incarcerated youth. *Punishment and Society* 9 (3), pp.235-251.
- Jacobs, J.B. and Steele, E.H. (1975). Prisons: Instruments of Law Enforcement or Social Welfare? *Crime and Delinquency*, 21, 348-355.
- Kirschenbaum, H. and Henderson, V. L. (eds.) (1990) *The Carl Rogers Reader*. London: Constable.
- Kruger, K.A., Trachtenberg, S.W. & Serpell, J.A. (2004). White Paper for March 2004 Conference Proceedings: *Can Animals Help Humans Heal? Animal Assisted*

Interventions in Adolescent Mental Health. Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society, University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine.
http://www2.vet.upenn.edu/research/centers/cias/pdf/CIAS_AAI_white_paper.pdf

Lane, J., Lanza-Kaduce, L., Frazier, C.E., & Bishop, D. M. (2002). Adult Versus Juvenile Sanctions: Voices of Incarcerated Youths. *Crime and Delinquency* 48 (3), pp. 431-455.

Leigh, J.W. (1956). *Communicating for Cultural Competence*. Prospect Heights: Waveland Press.

Maslow, A.H. (2005) . *Toward a psychology of being* (3rd ed.). New York: John Wiley and Sons

Merriam-Arduini, S. (2000). *Evaluation of an experimental program designed to have a positive effect on adjudicated violent, incarcerated male juveniles age 12-25 in the state of Oregon*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Pepperdine University.

Serpell, J.A. (2000). Animal companions and human well-being: An historical exploration of the value of human-animal relationships. In: A.H. Fine (Ed.), *Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy* (pp. 3-19). New York: Academic Press.

Strimple, E.O. (2003). A History of Prison Inmate-Animal Interactions. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 47 (1), 70-78.

Toch, H. (2000). Altruistic activity as correctional treatment. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 44, 270-278.

Turner, W. E. (2007). The Experiences of Offenders in a Prison Canine Program. *Federal Probation*, 71 (1), 38-43.