



FEATURE

Supporting vocational education and training (VET) students through dog-assisted activities

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Supporting vocational education and training (VET) students through dog-assisted activities

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Abstract

This paper explores dog-assisted and strength-based activities in the Finnish *Tutkintoon valmistava* [Preparatory Education for a Degree] (TUVA) programme. The participants of the study were students in the pilot TUVA group to obtain support and enhance their skills for vocational education and training (VET). Feedback from the students indicated that the dog-assisted activities and a strength-based approach lowered the threshold for engaging students and creating connections with them. This assisted in the development of their self-confidence and social skills.

Keywords: strength-based approach, study skills, social skills, dog-assisted therapy, VET

Introduction

This feature showcases the experiences of students with an animal-assisted and strength-based approach implemented in a pilot at a *Tutkintoon valmistava koulutus* [Preparatory Education for a Degree] (TUVA) programme, which was organised by the Rovaniemi Municipal Federation of Education (REDU). REDU is the largest VET provider in Lapland, northern Finland. The pilot was part of a European Social Fund project, *Asteelta Toiselle* [From Basic Education to Upper Secondary Level], which was conducted in a partnership between the University of Lapland and REDU. During the project a variety of supportive activities related to guidance, counselling, student welfare, and administration that were designed to prevent early school leaving, especially in VET, were reviewed. The project also aimed to strengthen the skills of VET professionals working with young people and the support they offer in the transition from basic education to VET and to highlight young people's perspectives of the reform.

This project explored the effects of the Finnish educational reform process, which was implemented in August 2021. Through the reform, the length of compulsory education was extended in Finland (Compulsory Education Law 1214/2020). Before this change, young people completed their compulsory education after finishing grade 9 at the basic education level, usually when they were 15 to 16 years old. Today, the compulsory education age is 18, which includes secondary education. After basic

education, students can choose to study either in general upper secondary schools, VET, or other compulsory education and training programmes. The aim of the reform was to ensure that all young people completed secondary-level qualifications. From a societal point of view, this reform is expected to have a significant impact, as it will raise the level of education and competences in Finland in the future and reduce learning gaps (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021).

Through the reform, additional support for young people who might have difficulties making up their minds about their education was made available. This support includes preparatory programmes, which strengthen young people's study skills and provide guidance and support to promote their degree studies. These programmes are called *Tutkintoon valmistava koulutus* [Preparatory Education for a Degree] (TUVA) (Act on Preparatory Education for a Degree 1215/2020). The TUVA programme was initiated in August 2022 and consists of, among other things, lessons related to study and career skills, skills needed in working life, and preparatory studies either for general upper secondary schools or VET.

The vast majority of TUVA programmes are organised by VET providers (Opetushallinnon tilastopalvelu [Educational Statistics Finland], 2023). The programmes consist of a maximum of one year of education, during which the students are guided and advised on choosing their future careers and provided possibilities to acquaint themselves with a variety of VET fields. At TUVA, the key is to support young people in identifying their strengths and discovering their interests. The programme covers various aspects like learning in working life, raising one's basic education grades, and/or completing some parts of VET programmes (Finnish National Board of Education, 2023).

Dog-assisted approach

Animal-assisted therapies, including the dog-assisted approach, are part of the Green Care method. This is a broad concept that combines human interaction and nature through a healthcare or healing approach, with the intention of utilising nature's effects on well-being in education, rehabilitation, or other professional, goal-oriented activities (Haubenhofer, Elings, Hassink and Hine, 2010). The essential elements of Green Care are contact with animals and nature, a sense of community, fellowship and acceptance, and meaningful, adaptive activities (Steigen, Kogstad, and Hummelvoll, 2016). These activities are versatile and can be implemented in different environments, both indoors and outdoors, in nature or in an institution.

Dogs are particularly well suited to cooperation with people and are therefore widely used in Green Care. Evidence from research has supported the benefits gained through a dog-assisted approach (Hüsgen, Peters-Scheffer and Didden, 2022). Dogs' intelligence is specifically related to their communication and interaction with humans. Therefore, they have an innate tendency to be interested in people and to easily identify people's individual features. They also understand people's gestures, expressions, and commands (Robinson, 1995).

In the dog-assisted activities described in this feature, the goal was to support the TUVA students' social skills, concentration, and focus and to provide a safe learning atmosphere. The dog's presence aimed to provide the students with experiences of success, encourage them to participate in interactions within

the group, and support commitment to their studies. During the activities, both the human dog handler and the dog met the students in a friendly and non-judgemental manner. All activities were goal-oriented, open, and transparent.

The planning phase took place in the spring term of 2022. The goals were agreed upon together with the TUVVA instructor to put the students' real needs at the centre of the activities. After a discussion between the dog handler and the TUVVA instructor, the decision was made to keep the activities already introduced to the group in their current form, to which dog assistance would be added. The students were interviewed, and it was confirmed that they had no allergies or fears that would prevent the dog from being in the group. All students knew about and approved of the dog's presence at the start of their studies. The dog's presence in the group was a joint decision of all involved. This created a positive climate right from the start. In addition to students, the dog handler's duty was to take care of the dog's well-being and to promote positive behaviour, so that the dog would not have to be afraid. This was discussed with the young people.

The TUVVA instructor advised that the activities should happen in nature, include group tasks, and be fun and easy to keep the threshold for the students to participate in them as low as possible. These kinds of activities facilitated the students' engagement and provided space for their own stories, wishes, and thoughts to emerge. The activities were guided by the instructor's professional expertise and knowledge of the group.

According to the previous literature, a dog-assisted approach can be used to facilitate various tasks with young people. Specifically, exercises with a dog can be related to everyday management skills and functional capacity, as well as emotional processing, social skills, and general interactions with others (Kahilaniemi, 2021). As demonstrated by the pilot group, during the planning phase, it is vital to consider possible allergies and expectations regarding the activity. These need to be discussed well before the actual activity to secure the appropriate permissions for dog-assisted activities from the management level of the educational institution (Koirat kasvatus- ja kuntoutustyössä ry [Dogs in Education and Rehabilitation registered association], 2023).

Dogs have the natural ability to make human beings feel well. Previous research indicates that the presence of dogs and the act of caressing them lowers blood pressure and slows the heart rate. Dog owners visit the doctor less often than others, and pets can help people recover from illnesses. Feelings of closeness with dogs can also reduce loneliness, and they offer support during meetings and socialising with other people (Kinnunen and Nikkari, 2017). These features were observed in the pilot group activities. The presence of the dog assisted the students with social activities, because it was easier for some of them to talk about themselves to the dog. The dog also helped in communication between the students, as it provided a topic of conversation (e.g. its niceness and busyness with dog things).

The breed, size, and age of the dog involved in the work may vary. However, the characteristics of the dog must be suitable for the work required. A dog's suitability for such work, in terms of its character and characteristics, is tested when it is at least one year old. Ethical guidelines govern dog-assisted

activities from the beginning of the training to the end of the dog's working career (Koirat kasvatus- ja kuntoutustyössä ry [Dogs in Education and Rehabilitation registered association], 2023).

Examples of dog-assisted activities in the pilot group

The dog-assisted activities plan for the TUVA group included 30 hours during the autumn term, with a maximum duration of three hours at a time. The exceptions were excursion days, where the maximum durations were longer. The themes for the autumn term were getting to know each other, teaming up, mapping strengths, and learning about the city and its services. These themes were encountered through a city walk, engaging in outdoor activities in the surrounding areas, a working life section, and an exploration of trends for further studies. The dog was not necessarily involved in every group session, but was used to support the work when required to achieve the activity's goals. During the sessions, the dog could be a perpetrator or a more passive participant. In a passive role, the main focus for the dog was to be present and help the students, for example, by facilitating the formation of groups or the discussion of themes. In an active role, the dog participated directly in the activity by performing pre-taught tasks with the students.

In the following sections, three examples of dog-assisted activities are presented. These have been chosen for this feature because they highlight the variety of activities and the beneficial role of the dog.

Nature tour

Students and instructors, including the school counsellor, took a nature trip to a camping area. In this activity, the dog's role was to be present and create a safe atmosphere. Its presence brought joy and a pleasant ambiance to a new and possibly socially tense situation. In this role, the dog was an icebreaker, which provided the students with a feeling of caring, and the interaction between the students and the dog was very active throughout the day.

At the beginning of the day, the students prepared lunches for the excursion as a group work activity. After a short car ride and a kilometre-long walk, they arrived at the lean-to campfire site. There, the counsellor started chopping firewood, and some willing students joined in the process. At the same time, a few other students helped the instructor bring out the lunches. To support social skills and grouping, a competition was planned for small groups in which each group had to use forest products and build the highest possible tower. The team that made the tallest one was rewarded, and together with the whole group, the prerequisites for success were discussed. The students concluded the discussion by determining that planning, doing things together, and helping each other were the cornerstones for success. The nature tour also included a quiet break, during which everyone found a comfortable place for themselves to spend a short amount of time. Afterwards, they shared their thoughts with others, including thoughts about the future and dreams related to their working careers. During the nature tour activity, the skills of listening, taking the floor, and expressing one's own opinions were practiced.

During the nature tour, the students spent time with the dog. They stroked its fur, played with it, and talked about their own pets. The dog's role was to enable the creation of a safe, homelike atmosphere. This was evident, for example, in the ways in which the students told the dog about themselves while

the rest of the group listened. This played the part of lowering the threshold to comfortably share ideas, thoughts, and even dreams. In addition, the dog's presence provided low-threshold moments for chatting among the students. They shared their thoughts and feelings about the dog's way of pottering about nature and the forest in a relaxed manner.

Strength-based activity

The strength-based approach is based on positive psychology, especially character strengths. Recognising, using, and cultivating these strengths helps individuals in their studies and later on during their life careers (Uusitalo-Malmivaara and Vuorinen, 2019). A VIA Character Strengths Survey and Character Report were used as tools (<https://www.viacharacter.org/>). Again, the dog was present during this activity and promoted the creation of an informal and friendly atmosphere (see figure 1).



Figure 1: dog supporting students during the strength-based activity. Photo by Henna Jokinen

The activity started with a survey, which was completed by each student individually, with help from the project coordinator and the school counsellor. After the survey, the students were divided into pairs and guided through a paired discussion to bring out their five strengths, which received the most points on

the survey. The pairs also discussed what the results might reveal and whether they agreed with them. After this, thoughts about the survey and the results were shared with the whole group. For the counsellor, the activity provided some information about the students' career planning, and the students were able to confirm their own strengths. The activity also supported instructors and students in getting to know each other and promoted social skills and group formation by giving them space to share their new understandings with others.

After the survey, the students provided positive feedback to each other. They made big praise frames, like screen frames, by using coloured cardboard and crayons in pairs. Then, they discussed their strengths and finally praised their pairs through the frames to others. When instructing the students, the dog handler made a praise frame for the dog and praised her through the frame.

Excursion day

The excursion day was carried out in a venue outside the school. Activities included walking outside of the school, socialising, and learning about important services in the city, such as students' welfare services and the Youth Centre. An indoor space was also provided, which was good for group work and shared discussions, and a fireplace was available for roasting sausages, which was the highlight of the day for the students. The dog joined the excursion day, because the students wanted her to take part in the trip. The instructor was also in favour of the dog's participation, for the reason that the students focused better on their work and were calmer when the dog was with them. The dog was an important participant because she was already a loved member of the group and provided emotional support to the students.



Figure 2: creating safe atmosphere with the support of the dog; Photo by Henna Jokinen.

The day started with a 'feeling tour', during which the Feeling Paws emotional skill cards were used. The students chose a dog card that described the emotional state of the morning. They successfully engaged in the work; with the help of the cards, it was easier to talk about other things that were on their minds, such as missing their pets. After the snack break, the strength mapping continued. For this part, from 100 cards describing strengths, each person chose two cards to describe themselves. These were discussed first in pairs, after which their thoughts were shared with the whole group.

In the next stage, the activity was expanded through work in small groups, during which the students made profiles of a VET student on a flipchart. The groups considered, for example, what strengths were needed to cope with studies, the strengths they already had, and which ones should be further developed. The students reviewed the results together. The presence of the dog clearly calmed the groups during their work, and the students remained very focused on the activity. The instructor indicated that this type of teamwork would not have been possible at the beginning of the school year, so there was a clear development in the students' teamwork skills.

Discussion

Feedback from the students was collected after each activity, and it was considered when planning and executing the subsequent activities. The main aim was to support the students and tailor the activities according to their wishes. The feedback assisted in identifying the features of an effective activity, how the students progressed, and what still needed to be developed. The students experienced dog-assisted activities and being with a dog as positive and pleasant. In the feedback, they explained that being with the dog helped them with their social skills and grouping, and that being with it had a therapeutic effect. The students were content with the dog's company. The dog's presence had induced cheer, and the students liked petting and playing with the dog. They also felt that the atmosphere was safe and did not experience or observe any bullying.

According to the dog handler, one of the most important lessons to learn was taking care of the dog's well-being. Safe and professional work must be based on ethically sustainable behaviour, and a dog working with students must enjoy its work. Also, the dog must be 100% safe, social, and good-natured. The dog used in the activities was extremely calm and, according to the young people, 'cute'. The dog loved being with the group and was always happy to participate. She did not need any other motivation and naturally considered everyone involved. The dog handler stated the following:

"The presence of the dog helped the students recognise their own feelings and facilitated interaction and communication. With the help of the dog, the young people also opened up to us adults more easily. The dog brings forth interaction without even noticing it."

Each student was individually considered and received attention and greetings by all professionals and the dog working with them. At the last meeting of the autumn term, the instructor commented on the atmosphere of the class as calm and providing a feeling of being 'at home'. Specifically, the students found filming the dog freely in class calming. The dog handler also recognised the calmness of the students when the dog was in class. Concentration was better, and sudden movements and loud noises

were avoided, which meant that the dog gained respect for her existence, and the level of compliance with the rules improved.

At the end of the autumn semester, the instructor explained that the dog-assisted activities supported the achievement of the goals. The activities that took the students' wishes and needs into account, as well as being with the dog, made it possible for both instructors and students to feel that the atmosphere of the group was safe and cosy, as exemplified in the following quotation:

“With the dog and her handler, the group had a much more caring culture. The activities were very successful in this group.” (Instructor)

The students' social skills advanced, and the dog made it easier and encouraged even weaker students to participate in the activities. Especially in group situations, it seemed easier to speak through the dog to the whole group. In addition, the students learned to listen and pay attention to each other. Being with the dog calmed things down, and everyone considered the presence of the dog, for example, by using a certain voice and avoiding sudden movements. With the help of the dog, each member of the group was noticed and met individually.

Conclusions

The dog-assisted activities in the pilot group offered a way to strengthen students' social skills and commitment to their studies and to create a safe social atmosphere. The activities supported teaming up and strengthened the students' interaction skills.

In general, the TUVVA programme's goals are to support students in choosing their careers in VET by allowing them to find their strengths and improve their study skills. During the programme, students learn about different options in VET and work assignments in different trades. After TUVVA, the objective is for students to move on to secondary education. Therefore, it is important for the students to develop skills that can be used in a training trial or that allow them to learn more about working life. These goals were all supported in the pilot group via dog-assisted activities (see <https://redu.fi/fi/uutiset/asteelta-toiselle-hanke-panostaa-varhaiseen-puuttumiseen>).

The composition of the TUVVA group is constantly changing, as new students join throughout the academic year and, at the same time, some students move on in their study paths. This brings forth certain challenges, especially in terms of teaming up. The activities described in this feature created new teamwork methods, and with the dog present, it was possible to make better use of the various excursions with the students. Generally, the presence of the dog promoted the group's interaction and increased their feelings of security.

The results of the dog-assisted activities in the pilot group were promising. The students and the dog got along well, and all participants, including the students, the instructor, the dog handler, and the social worker, confirmed the outcomes. Therefore, based on these positive results, we recommend that an animal-assisted approach be widely used in VET, especially with students who are still in the process of finding their career paths.

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