Dogs in schools: Dogs Connect as an example of a dogs-first wellbeing dog programme

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Dogs may be loved in Australia, but they are still placed precariously in human society, including when they work as wellbeing dogs in schools.

APPROACH: In this commentary, we explore through a case study of Dogs Connect, the importance of placing the dogs at the centre of our thinking and using positive training methods so as to enable the dogs, not just the students to flourish. As we will explain, "alpha dog or pack leader" narratives are now discredited and should not be used. Instead, policies and procedures need to be written to enshrine the rights of dogs working in all canine programmes, including when they provide emotional and social support to school pupils in busy educational settings.

IMPLICATIONS: We suggest some practical guidelines for planning for, and implementing, wellbeing dog programmes in schools and talk about how school social workers might lend their support.

Keywords: Dogs in social work, dogs-first school programmes, dogs in schools, centring dogs in animal-assisted interventions, animal labour, dogs in therapy

The presence of dogs in schools and community environments for various animal assisted intervention (AAI) roles ("therapy dogs" or "wellbeing dogs") has become increasingly popular, notably for their therapeutic value for children and strengthening the work of social workers and counsellors in education settings. More generally, dogs offer emotional support and help reduce stress levels amongst students. They may provide social support, promote a sense of belonging, reduce stress and anxiety, and even facilitate learning by simply being present (Henderson et al., 2020; Jalongo, 2018; Kirnan & Ventresco, 2018). Carlyle and Graham (2019) suggested that dog–human encounters contribute to multi-species wellbeing by creating vital spaces for affect attunement. The presence of dogs can provide comfort during challenging situations and provide cross-species mutual aid. Studies also show that dogs can improve social interactions and communication skills amongst students (Verhoeven et al., 2023), which not only fosters empathy but also enhances interpersonal relationships within the school community. Furthermore, dogs can elevate communication skills among children who may struggle with verbal expression (Karpoutzaki et al., 2023).

The benefits do not stop there. Research has also shown that the presence of dogs in classrooms can positively influence attendance rates among students by creating a positive learning environment

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that encourages students to come to school regularly (Sorin et al., 2015). Moreover, engaging with dogs promotes responsibility and empathy amongst students, fostering a sense of accountability while also enhancing social skills (Keppens et al., 2019), thus enriching Humane Education programmes, which are designed to instil core principles that all animals are valuable and deserve to be treated with respect.

However, it is abundantly clear that these studies all focus on the human benefits of dogs on the people with whom they interact, whilst many of these programmes may be potentially problematic for dogs. For instance, such programmes may emphasise human comfort and safety while neglecting the dogs' freedom to choose, their agency, or their levels of comfort. And no matter how tolerant a dog may be, this is not a fair position for any dog. So while the literature supports the benefits of therapy dogs on humans, there is little to support how these programmes can best serve dogs. We hope to shed light on the importance of centring the wellbeing of dogs who are ultimately working to support the wellbeing of others and by identifying gaps in the literature about canine wellbeing in any type of AAI.

Some of these anthropocentric misgivings are borne from the fallacy of outdated training methodologies, including the misguidance of a "dominance theory" rhetoric (van der Borg et al., 2015) that is a pervasive methodology for teaching dogs. Dominance theory suggests that a rank reduction technique is needed to maintain a dogs' submissiveness or reduce their dominant nature, placing humans in a greater position of power over them (Friedman & Brinker, 2001). This may include various techniques of training and interacting with therapy dogs that rely on fear or intimidation to disempower them, commanding their compliance and obedient behaviour regardless of their feelings or emotional experiences. It can also inform everyday interactions that may reduce choice and agency and create an expected

level of compliance from dogs when being handled or touched. However, this theory has not only been debunked but based on our current understanding of canine ethology and behaviour, it is also harmful to their wellbeing (for e.g., Jones, 2022). Generally, these methods not only reduce the dog's agency, but also increase the likelihood of defensive behaviours (Ziv, 2017). Sadly, when a dog feels unsafe and devoid of genuine choice, they are more likely to elevate their communication level to more overt behaviours such as growling, snapping, snarling, or even biting. And for that, their risk of rehoming or euthanisation increases.

Another peril is the dearth of knowledge about dog communication and species-specific behaviour amongst the general population, including teachers, social workers, practitioners and community members (Walsh et al., 2024). Though dogs in classrooms and therapeutic contexts provide a great opportunity for children and adults to learn how dogs communicate, often their behaviours are misinterpreted or missed altogether. Risley-Curtiss et al. (2013) found that the social workers in the United States who involve animals as part of their intervention strategies, largely do so without adequate education and/or training. A Canadian study by Hanrahan et al. (2013) also indicated a lack of awareness in social work practice about the human–animal bond (HAB) or its potential for mutual reciprocity. One of the main contributions of these findings is that there is a scarcity of social work literature that attempts to consider the perspectives or experiences of animals involved in social work practice and little support for practitioners. And of the therapy dog programmes that operate, many generally do not focus on dog behaviour or canine emotionality, leaving dogs vulnerable to being used for their utility value (McDowell et al., 2023). And in many cases, the scarcity of a learned cross-species communication system means there is no ability for the dog to control what is

happening to them, leaving them vulnerable to non-consensual touching, coercion, or forced encounters, particularly in settings where they are expected to be touched often for extended periods of time (Jones, 2024).

Currently in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand there are no standardised guidelines, policies, or regulation for teaching social workers or teachers about a dog-first approach or to support practitioners interested in bringing dogs into their communities. As such, any person can bring any dog into these communities with very little preparation or experience. Thus, we argue that policy and standardised guidelines for dogs in classrooms and other therapeutic environments, which extends beyond school communities and into other diverse groups including therapy and support, should be defined and constructed in a way that centres the dog more wholly and better considers their species-specific perspective. These guidelines should be based on existing empirical knowledge of dogs' mental lives and the extensive work supporting the five domains model of animal welfare (Mellor & Beausoleil, 2015; Mellor et al., 2020), which includes what is fundamentally important to dogs, such as freedom to choose, bodily autonomy, and feeling safe. The five domains model is about decreasing negative welfare states while simultaneously increasing positive welfare states. To be prudent in such efforts, teaching children and adults the *language of dog* is one fundamental way to ensure consent is a locus of all interactions. Structured planning, including a well-defined training plan, should be utilised to introduce dogs into these types of environments as a way to ensure both dogs and students are prepared and can help to set valid expectations.

Centring dogs in AAI

As mentioned earlier, dogs are not often the primary focus in relative literature about canine–human interactions, particularly in AAI. This is not an isolated phenomenon.

The foundational nature/culture divide of Western humanism provides the foundational logic for our human-centric practices; thus, the challenge of decentring the human (and centring the dog) can be arduous. For one, theorising about centring dogs and enacting that theory in practice poses challenges by upheaving the notion that the value of dogs belongs to humans. While such work to centre dogs more wholly may be conceptualised, it is often imbued in traditional welfarist language about the need to "look after" them properly (food, water, grooming, etc.) while ignoring any consideration for the structural legitimization of their oppression (Jones & Taylor, 2023). For example, the New South Wales Government has very vague and loose guidelines on their website suggesting that dogs should always be leashed, as well as desexed and registered with their council (see *Support Dog Guidelines*, https://education.nsw.gov.au/), but fails to mention anything about their space and emotional needs, or importance of respecting their bodily autonomy. Thus, the aim to centre dogs in this domain is fraught with pervasive humanism and traditional welfarist notions of how to use dogs more (but better).

The roots of humanist approaches to dogs as tools are fuelled by the dated ideas about who dogs are in relation to humans—that is, dominance theory and hierarchical structures of human exceptionalism (Charles, 2016; Jones, 2022)— but also by language steeped with power imbalances. The way in which dogs are socially constructed influences how they are treated by humans and by society (Jones, 2024; Lawrence, 1994), and these normative cultural practices are intimately entangled with language and discourse (Stibbe, 2001). Language can reflect and create the structure of how they are regarded, used, and treated. In other words, an ideology of *who is dog* and their duty to humans.

Ideology is a mode of thought and practice "developed by dominant groups

in order to reproduce and legitimate their domination" (van Dijk, 1997, p. 25). Thus, rather than explicitly encouraging oppression and exploitation, ideology often manifests itself more effectively by being *implicit*. This is achieved by basing discourse on assumptions that are treated as if they were common sense, but which are "common sense assumptions in the service of sustaining unequal relations of power" (Fairclough, 2013, p. 84). These ideologies are not just prevalent with dogs in AAI, but with dogs in various communities and relational contexts with humans and can inform how children and adults relate to dogs inside and outside of these environments.

Although social work and related fields of AAI have been slow to embrace the intrinsic value and interests of other animals (Fraser et al., 2021), there are existing frameworks that, with some adjustment, can help guide us. For example, Humane Education and green social work recognises that power relations flow through all domains of social work practice (Alston, 2013; Dominelli, 2012, 2013). Understanding the influences of such power imbalances can help us craft more dog-centred approaches to dogs in the domains of social work, therapeutic, and classroom communities and is the foundation of the Dogs Connect programme, which will be discussed in the next section. Thus, part of creating a new standardised (and hopefully regulated) policy for dogs in the classroom and therapeutic environments that centres their best interest is twofold: 1. Focusing dogs' agency and emotional wellbeing as individuals who have inherent value separate from their value to and with humans; and 2. The use of dog-centred language/ideology that fosters empathy and understanding for their perspective. Basing a policy in empirical evidence that considers the canine perspective (that is, including cognitive and behavioural research about dogs), we can better understand how to best design guidelines for various AAI programmes. We suggest a preferable model for these guidelines is exemplified

by the Mentorship Programme designed by the Dogs Connect organisation based in Australia and could be used to help shape future regulatory guidelines and policies for AAI.

Dogs Connect

Originating from an educational context, the Dogs Connect programme emerged as a response to identified gaps and challenges faced by Grant Shannon, programme founder and co-author of this article, during his tenure as a teacher. The initiative aimed to address the unique needs of students grappling with gaps in personal and social capabilities, leading to disruptive behaviours within traditional classroom settings. Social workers in schools where Dogs Connect operates may encounter children and dogs within their communities who are particularly bonded or who gain emotional support from their presence. This relationship can be used to help children build stronger emotional and communicative skills and to feel supported and safe in potentially challenging situations. Dogs Connect emphasises the integration of wellbeing dogs, not just a visiting "therapy" dog, but a dog who becomes a community member and who enacts learning and teaching practices aimed at improving mental health and wellbeing of their community members. Because wellbeing dogs are part of the community, rather than simply a guest in the way some therapy dogs are employed, this means they have the potential to forge genuine relationships with community members as well as their caregivers. The programme evolved from reflective deliberations on strategies to support students in developing empathy and the ability to co-regulate through connections with non-human animals, particularly dogs, and highlights how the integration could benefit the dog's wellbeing by allowing them to forge meaningful, long-term relationships.

The programme focuses on preparing communities to perceive their dogs as

individuals and vulnerable, sentient beings. A fundamental element is the emphasis on dogs having choices, the ability to exercise agency, and feel comfortable in highly stimulating environments. For example, to facilitate shaping these types of interactions, Dogs Connect uses a deliberate terminology within their guidelines and by encouraging the same terminology to be used by practitioners and community members. The terminology is aimed at moving away from human-centric approaches, where words like "obedient", and "commands" are commonly used. Instead, the emphasis is on positive language, communication, and the role of humans as guardians or caregivers. Dogs-first humane education programmes aim to cultivate a sense of responsibility and empathy towards the needs and wellbeing of dogs, teaching students or clients about how to interact with dogs in the community and beyond. This is especially true if we are teaching children the "language of dog" and how to navigate consensual interactions across species boundaries in all dog–human interactions. It is about empowering individuals to understand and cultivate authentic relationships with their canine companions.

The organisation's mission extends to establishing robust processes and structures, prioritising safety, sustainability, and respect for the distinct needs of dogs (which is outlined in the following section). Over 400 Australian schools of every possible type are finding this to be a pathway to learning how to place emphasis on animal wellbeing as well as building authentic, mutual connection between humans and dogs (www.dogsconnect.net.au), and this can extend to all AAI environments.

Praxis of Dogs Connect

The philosophy propagated by Dogs Connect ensures that dogs are not exposed to risks stemming from a lack of understanding or preparedness. Recognising the importance of disseminating fundamental knowledge of

dogs within communities, the programme's initiatives seek to educate through essential learnings that include topics of agency and consent for dogs. Generally, consent refers to giving permission, approval, or agreement (Jones, 2024), allowing individuals to have control over what happens to them (agency). It is typically associated with interactions between humans (Fennell, 2022; Jones, 2022, 2024); however, other animals "do, in fact, offer consent [assent], or denial / withdrawal of consent [dissent], through their emotions, preferences, behaviours, and physical / physiological states" (Fennell, 2022, p. 1). Knowledge of canine communication and learning processes are paramount for this to be successful.

However, because many humans struggle with understanding the body language of dogs (Demirbas et al., 2016), this inevitably impacts how each interaction with them unfolds (Jones, 2022, 2024), potentially eroding trust and diminishing the integrity of these relationships over time. As such, interactions may lead dogs to experience negative psychological impacts, such as increased anxiety (McMillan, 2020; Mellor et al., 2020), potentially leading to dangerous behaviour in response to feeling unsafe. Through the Dogs Connect mentorship programme, individuals are not only taught to facilitate authentic two-way connections that are sustainable but also to derive genuine enjoyment and cognitive and emotional stimulation for both dogs and humans (Shannon, 2023). Upon the establishment of an authentic connection within a community setting, educators or social workers can discover creative possibilities for integrating this connection into teaching, learning, and therapeutic practices. This is particularly pertinent in the realm of social and emotional capabilities, aspects that may pose challenges when attempting to embed them into the standard curriculum of a conventional learning environment.

To do so, Dogs Connect has structured the following programme to aid communities

in establishing and maintaining a dogs-first connection in the follow ways:

1. Legal considerations

Dogs Connect provides all legal considerations including best practice and risk assessment documents and support with how to align with existing policies, missions and vision statements for individual communities. As stated earlier, there is a complete lack of regulation about the use of wellbeing dogs involved in AAI communities, creating potentially unsafe environments that may end poorly for both humans and dogs. It is worth noting that according to the Centre for Disease Control, 4.5 million Americans receive dog bites each year (CDC, 2024), particularly young children aged 5 to 9 years old. Without regulation or focus on consensual interactions, dogs can feel unsafe and ultimately this may lead to defensive behaviours like biting (Jones, 2024). Dogs who are not well prepared, or who may not be suitable candidates, are often placed into situations which place unrealistic expectations on them. So while avoidance of these situations is emphasised, dogs are living and reactive beings and legal considerations must be established.

2. Ethical and welfare focused guidelines

One unique focus of the Dogs Connect programme is the stance that wellbeing dogs should not be viewed for their utility value to humans. There is a risk that dogs may be viewed solely as therapeutic tools to provide emotional or therapeutic support rather than as individuals with their own needs and desires. This could lead to the inattention or disregard of the dog's positive welfare states, such as ignoring signs of stress or putting the dogs into unrealistic or unfair situations that undermines their agency. This also includes other considerations about their environment, enrichment needs, choice to behave normally, appropriate rest, as well as preparedness and

physical maintenance, such as grooming and travel. A recent study highlighted the wide discrepancies in guidelines and standards held by organisations relating to therapy/ wellbeing dogs involved in AAI in the United States (McDowell et al., 2023). These ethical standards are of particular importance given societal expectations and community attitudes towards non-human animals (Cobb et al., 2020). The welfare of therapy dogs has been identified as a key factor for the future sustainability of these practices due to the connection between public expectations and social license to operate (McDowell et al., 2023).

Dogs Connect has woven these ethical values into their guidelines in a way that supports proper dog selection/assessment and training plans, the language they use to foster empathy and respect, the emphasis on choice, agency and consent, and the ongoing evaluation of the dog's wellbeing by qualified dog behaviour experts. Dogs Connect provides communities with templates, policy manuals, and ethical checklists to best support practitioners and their wellbeing dogs.

3. Evaluating and sourcing suitable canine candidates

Part of the process of centring dogs in school or social work settings is to find and assess suitable dog candidates. Due to the absence of regulation in Australia and New Zealand, there is an overall lack of uniform standards or codes of practice (Jones et al., 2018), including what type or level of training the dogs receive or their behavioural suitability. Evaluations include gauging both their personality and enjoyment levels within highly stimulating environments that lead to positive interactions with people in the community as well as accounting for their wellbeing and happiness. Not all dogs are suitable for this type of environment and not all dogs are equipped with the proper skills to be a part of a school or other therapeutic community.

Whilst generally organisations that employ therapy dogs use assessments based on the dog's behavioural responses in a range of different environments, Clark et al. (2019) argued that this offers no guarantee that the dog will not become stressed. Rayment et al. (2015) instead argued that a test used to measure a dog's suitability for AAI should be based on how appropriate and capable the dog is, based on the tasks of their specific role. McDowell et al. (2023) suggested that canine personality is a more stable indicator to show different behavioural responses to a stimulus. Overall, the variability or consistency of personalities among dogs that excel in AAI work has not been extensively studied and may be an area that is ripe for further investigation. This does show that having someone evaluating wellbeing dogs who is well versed in dog behaviour (for example, a certified dog behaviour consultant or board certified veterinary behaviourist) is important to ensuring dogs are thriving in their community.

It is also worth noting that the relationship of the dog and their caregivers is also identified as an essential factor that can influence the dog's effectiveness in AAI roles (Mongillo et al., 2015). The caregiver's behaviour, tone of voice, and body language can all impact the dog's behavioural response. Thus, the Dogs Connect programme seeks to build a strong connection between the caregiver and dog as a way to improve the overall experience for everyone involved, from modern, humane training programmes to their ongoing educational support (see numbers 4 through 6).

4. Training and skill-building for dogs

Concern for dog welfare in AAI has traditionally focused on aversive and coercive dog handling techniques, such as the use of choke chains, shock collars, loud reprimand, physical corrections, paired with dogs being unable to avoid social intrusions or have a "safe zone" into which to retreat (example, Fine, 2019; Hatch, 2007). Whilst

these are important activities and tools to advocate against, and indeed part of the community preparedness (see point 5 below), Dogs Connect takes an even richer approach. Teaching dogs requires a deep and nuanced understanding of learning science and humane practice, but it also requires knowledge of dog body language, identifying signs of assent and dissent (and how to communicate consent effectively), as well as effective ways of teaching dogs that they have the choice to walk away from any interaction, and that their choice will be respected. This should be provided by qualified behaviour experts through one-on-one instructional classes, videos and instructional materials to aid teachers and social workers to use the most empirically founded and humane approaches to training.

Additionally, the focus should be on skills that allow dogs to succeed in a shared human–dog environment without conflict. Basic "life-skills" such as maintaining four paws on the floor, nose-to-hand targeting used for positioning their body without physical manipulation, leash walking, resting on a mat, leaving or dropping items, and appropriate communication to opt in or out of an interaction should be emphasised. These can provide the dog with clarity about what is expected of them, but also reduce conflict between people and dogs. All skills can be taught using positive reinforcement including treat and toy rewards. Having all community members work together to maintain these behaviours is a great way to help students or clients build a bond with their wellbeing dog companion and to strengthen the communication within their relationship. It also helps them to understand these positive training applications with dogs outside of the community environment.

5. Community preparedness

Dogs Connect enables a harmonious introduction of dogs into the community that include presentations, staff meetings and discussion forums to support the ongoing

development and success of wellbeing dogs. Individual dogs are introduced with their own profiles, that highlight their importance as an individual (as opposed to "the dog".) Presentations offered also focus on how to improve positive welfare outcomes for that individual, how to understand and ask for consent (and subsequently understand when consent is withdrawn), learning about body language and strategies for instructing clients or students to behave in a way that will ensure the dog feels safe.

Another part of preparing the dog's community is to arrange their environment, such as providing "safe/quiet" zones where the dog has space to relax without interruption, treat stations around the room/space to facilitate positive reinforcement of desirable behaviours, gates as needed for management of both the dog and of people (particularly so dogs are not tethered or leashed for hours on end), appropriate equipment, sensory enrichment items, toys, food, and outdoor areas. Dogs Connect also manages the daily scheduling, creating a balanced timetable and structure to the way the dog will spend their time, ensuring the dog is not overextended in their "workload."

Setting the stage for realistic expectations of the dog's behaviour, of the human's behaviour, and how to handle moments of consternation when behaviour may not meet expectations is fundamental to building trust and is the underpinning of any healthy relationship (Lemay & Venaglia, 2016).

6. Humane Education and human–animal bond

Education of community leaders and members is in part aimed at fostering a Humane Education learning environment. Humane Education has an emphasis on the impact of human actions on the natural world and other animals and seeks to raise awareness about nonhuman animal welfare and all animal rights, whilst encouraging individuals to make informed and responsible decisions. This includes, largely in the case of wellbeing dogs, the HAB.

A 2020 study by Yeung et al. found there is a general lack of understanding over how to include education about the HAB in social work practice. HAB continues to influence and contribute to the lives of families and individuals, and social workers have a duty to develop general awareness and knowledge of the benefits to human health of interacting with other animals (with their consent). Part of teaching communities about how to best interact with dogs is about improving perceptions and expectations placed on dogs within society, having a more global impact on their wellbeing outside of the classroom or therapeutic communities.

Animals often fall victim to violence with no representation of their interests. Thus, the aim of Humane Education, as well as green social work, as mentioned earlier, is to take a holistic approach that includes the wellness of the non-human animals with whom we share our homes and communities. This puts social workers and teachers who invite dogs into their communities in a unique position to advocate for improved wellbeing and consideration of everyone, including dogs. Dogs Connect helps to empower and co-create curriculum that expands on these philosophies in a practical way, including treating dogs as community members who, as such, have the right to be treated respectfully.

7. Networking and continual support

Dogs Connect ensures ongoing support by staying well connected to their communities, overseeing the welfare standards of dogs in order to continuously evaluate their emotional and physical well-being, and to ensure their continued success within their role. This support extends beyond the classroom or therapy environment and includes ongoing training support for the dog to safeguard both the humane teaching methods and the maintenance of skills

relevant to their role as therapy dog. Part of this also includes scheduling what the dogs do during the day, including outdoor and leisure time, and a balance of engagement/interactions with rest or "down" time. This is adapted for each individual dog and is based on their overall time spent in the community but is also partially facilitated through appropriate initial and ongoing assessment of dogs' suitability to ensure they are comfortable in their community environment. It also means designing and re-visiting their individualised ongoing humane training plan to ensure skills needed to navigate this unique environment are successful. Programme participants also benefit from an online community that include other wellbeing dog practitioners who share their experiences and successes in a way that can support and help people to navigate questions as they may arise, which can be a flexible approach to real-world ethical challenges (O'Mathúna & Iphofen, 2022).

8. Language

Language not only expresses identities but also constructs them, for ourselves, for other animals, for other people. Words are inscribed with ideological meanings (Chassy, 2015). At all stages of engagement, from lessons to written communication, Dogs Connect emphasises positive language and the deliberate avoidance of human-dominant terminology to wellbeing communities to operate in a manner that maintains the health and happiness of dogs during teaching, learning, or therapy sessions. This is crucial in these types of settings, as it provides an opportunity for modelling positive language more generally, and explicitly models a high level of respect and appreciation for non-human animals. One such example is the suggested terminology change from using the word "no" toward dogs who show undesired behaviour, to using the words "excuse me".

In the context of social and emotional capabilities, areas often deemed

challenging to integrate into the traditional classroom, positive language and a non-dominant approach provide a conducive environment (Kosonen & Benson, 2021). This environment fosters opportunities for educators to introduce concepts related to understanding structured approaches to emotional escalation and de-escalation by comprehending the escalation cycle, supporting co-regulation between humans and dogs. The understanding of co-regulation further extends to the concept of self-regulation for both species. For example, data collected by Dogs Connect in 2023 showed that community member participants' "yes" response to "I have strategies that I can use to regulate my emotions, and I can explain them" increased from 54.8% in pre-test phase to 84.6% post-test. And that their "yes" response to "I have strategies that I can use to manage my reactivity and I can explain these" increased from 51.7% in pre-test and 89.3% post-test (Shannon, 2023).

As this understanding deepens through multiple modes and expressions, the connection with dogs presents valuable opportunities for exploring emotional literacy and consensual interactions, including concepts such as personal space and inappropriate touch.

The future of regulatory guidelines

To move into an ethical multi-species classroom or social workspace, we need to centre dogs and account for their unique and important experiences and abilities. Our unique proficiencies—Jones, a human-animal studies scholar and dog behaviour consultant, and Shannon, an educator and the founder of Dogs Connect—aptly positions us to validate the need for industry regulations. Though Dogs Connect provides a individualised support programme, its structure offers insights that support the importance of a dogs-first standardised set of guidelines and the need for policy and regulation. Therefore, we suggest a standard policy and procedure for the use of

wellbeing dogs used in AAI, which should minimally include the following overarching sections:

1. *A dog-centred model:* Integration of empirical research that highlights the mental lives of dogs and should emphasise the importance of their need for choice and agency.
2. *A dog-centred language*: Policy and procedures should strive to cultivate reverence, respect, and responsibility, all of which are important for developing cross-species competence. Part of this is avoiding the use of oppressive language, while another part is about centring the narrative of dogs.
3. *A clearly defined ethical standard for teaching methods*: Teaching dogs skills using the most humane methods rooted in a strong understanding of canine behaviour, learning science, and ethical practice. This should include training skills prior to joining the programme as well as ongoing attention to maintaining behaviours. This should be facilitated through a certified dog trainer, certified dog behaviour consultant or board certified veterinary behaviourist.
4. *A clearly defined outline of communication*: Teaching all people who are involved with dogs about body language and communication signals (displacement behaviours, stress signals and/or calming signals) that allow dogs to communicate their needs clearly and for humans to understand them.
5. *Structured planning*: A standardised structured plan can help to prepare dogs, community members, educators, social workers or other practitioners. This should involve:
   a. Teaching human learners in advance about consent/withdrawal of consent during interactions, appropriate ways to interact with their dog, being respectful of the dog's needs, and learning about the lives of the individual dog who will be joining their community.
   b. Ensuring dogs are able to communicate their needs adequately and clearly, conditioning them to the school environment ahead of time and making sure the environment is comfortable for them.
   c. Preparing the environment to welcome a dog in advance also needs some planning. For example, this might be creating safe zones that the dog can use to ask for space, having enrichment centres, or having treat stations set up to use for positive reinforcement of desirable behaviours.
   d. Teaching safety skills that help dogs interact successfully with their environment and feel safe. This should minimally include keeping four paws on the floor, a stationing behaviour (e.g., providing them a safe zone), a recall, and leash skills.
   e. Ongoing assessment by a qualified professional such a certified dog behaviour consultant or board-certified veterinary behaviourist to ensure the dog's physical and emotional wellbeing is maintained.
   f. Providing networking opportunities for collaborations and continuing education for educators or practitioners.

Detailing a dogs-first approach, which integrates these five important elements, is needed if we are to seriously consider the welfare of both humans and animals in this advancing field. Though a detailed outline of proposed standardised institutionalised and regulatory guidelines is beyond the scope of this article, future research should look at these five elements and dogs-first models (like Dogs Connect) to examine the most effective welfare-focused advancement for all AAI to ensure the wellbeing of dogs is prioritised and to create regulation for their inclusion in these types of communities.

Conclusion

The benefits of the dog–human connection extends beyond the confines

of the classroom, offering a multitude of opportunities for genuine support. The impact on the overall wellbeing and mutual aid is evident in the Dogs Connect model, both incidentally and intentionally, through structured approaches that guide these interactions. The Dogs Connect model can inform a standardised guideline for such programmes that better centres the dogs and their wellbeing in classroom communities and improves positive welfare states. The integration of the human–canine connection into educational or social work settings not only enriches the learning experience but also contributes significantly to the holistic wellbeing of all involved, highlighting the importance of a policy that reflects both canine and human values.

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