Animal Assisted Intervention at The Nelson ARK: A social work placement reflection

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ABSTRACT

The involvement of animals in aspects of social work assessments and interventions has been touted as a positive development. Yet, little attention has been given to the potential for animal involvement in social work education and training. This practice reflection describes social work student placements at The Nelson ARK, where Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI) is employed in programmes for youth. Social work placement coordinator, Letitia, and The Nelson ARK manager, Karen, provide the background to this initiative, while students, Tessa and Brooke, share a snapshot of their placement experiences that highlight a fresh appreciation of human–animal relations. From our collective experiences, the authors propose that field education in services that provide AAI affords novel and valuable learning for social work students.

KEYWORDS: Animal Assisted Intervention; animal–human relations; social work; social work student education; social work placement

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Letitia: As I write about the recent inclusion of animals as part of the social work student placement experience Tiger, a young black cat that I adopted from the SPCA, sits precariously between me and my computer keyboard. My main role for the Bachelor of Social Work Programme (BSW) at Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology (NMIT) involves organising and overseeing social work student placements. In a small catchment area like the Nelson Tasman region, the quest to secure the needed quantity and quality of placements can be challenging. Rather than restricting opportunities for learning, this scarcity has given rise to less conventional and more innovative social work placement opportunities, such as those at The Nelson ARK. From this experience, we contend that there is valuable learning for field education in services offering Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI).

Over the past two years, NMIT social work students Tessa and Brooke completed their social work placements at The Nelson ARK. Before they share insights from this experience, Karen, the manager of The Nelson ARK and on-site fieldwork educator for the social work students, provides a context for the student learning experiences by describing the setting and this placement environment.

The Nelson ARK

Karen: The Nelson ARK is located at Stonehurst Farm, outside of Nelson, Aotearoa New Zealand and offers AAI group work and programmes. The Nelson ARK culture, founded on the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa (Ministry of Youth Development, 2004) and Ara Taiohi (2020) Code of Ethics, is strengths-based with the premise that all those

involved (young people, staff, trained volunteers and the dogs) bring skills with them. The key message of our work is compassion in action and by sharing the rescue dogs' story, a young person is able to relate the dog's experiences to their own. The value and impact of sharing the dogs' stories for young people feature in the learnings that Tessa and Brooke will share below.

The APART (Animals People and Rehabilitative Training) programme combines dog training with Healing Species, in which empathy is the primary focus. Each young person is matched with a rescue dog that, over eight weeks, they train under staff supervision. Like the young people who attend The Nelson ARK programmes, the welfare of the rescue dogs is paramount and they are assessed for suitability prior to the course by The Nelson ARK dog trainer and a representative from the Dog Advisory Welfare Group.

The young people who attend the programme have often experienced multiple challenges in their life, and dog training teaches the value of patience, discipline and hard work as well as providing the opportunity to learn co-operative and considerate ways of problem solving. Non Violent Communication (NVC) and emotional intelligence training are included in "chalk and talk sessions". The programme culminates in a demonstration of student and canine learning at a community graduation, after which the dog is put up for adoption. The students assist in building a profile to best find a forever home for their canine partner.

Follow-up sessions held over the subsequent 12 months aim to further develop a young person's sense of identity, resilience and connection. Furthermore, The Nelson ARK-Action and Social Group offer graduates of the APART programme a way to remain connected where they can contribute to aspects of service provision.

The social work programme context

The inclusion of animals as part of the social work curricula is an exception rather than a standard component of the student learning experience (Adamson & Darroch, 2016). Bretzlaff-Holstein (2018) indicates that attention to animals in social work practice and education is limited and has largely focused on the social and therapeutic benefits of the human–animal bond/partnerships (Risley-Curtiss, 2010), the relationship between animal cruelty and family violence (Adamson & Darroch, 2016; Walker, Aimers, & Perry, 2015), how animals feature in the context of disasters (see Adamson & Darroch, 2016) and attention to grief and loss (see Arkow, 2020). Chalmers, Dell, Dixon, Dowling, and Hanrahan (2020) argue that, while attention to human–animal relations is gaining traction for social work educators, researchers and practitioners, there is not yet the education and training in place to support this growing area of interest. Moreover, Hanrahan (2013) found that, while social workers have an awareness of the value of human–animal relations, either this is largely ignored in practice or practitioners are including animals in their practice but without specific training to do so. Arkow (2020) contends that including relevant material into coursework and field placements can open up research, education and practice opportunities and enrich personal and professional development. This will enable social workers to respond more effectively to human clients, the wider community and to the non-human members of these collectives (Arkow, 2020).

Like many other tertiary degrees, the NMIT BSW programme does not offer a course or specific lectures dedicated to equipping social work students to work with animals as part of their practicum or subsequent social work practice. Currently, at NMIT, attention to animals is incorporated into existing social work courses, which include topics such as the connection between animal cruelty and family violence; the impact of the loss of a companion animal; as well as

attention to animal–human partnerships and AAI through occasional guest speaker presentations by Karen, from The Nelson ARK and Koru, her huntaway cross.

Building on this nascent attention to animals and social work, Tessa and Brooke offer a snapshot of key learnings from their placements at The Nelson ARK. These include an appreciation of human–animal relations; the value of animals in violence education and a consideration of the contributions of the dogs as co-workers.

Social work student placement experiences

Similar to the student reflections that Adamson and Darroch (2016) include in their account of embedding animal-inclusive teaching in the social work curricula, the placement experience at The Nelson ARK allowed Tessa and Brooke to develop a new appreciation of human–animal relations:

> Tessa: I've lived on a farm all my life and my background with animals sparked my interest in a placement with The Nelson ARK. But, before going to The ARK, I had no comprehension of just how greatly animals can help an individual get through a tough time in their life. From the very beginning of the programme, the young person is introduced to the rescue dog and is told the dog's background story and the challenges it has faced, physically and emotionally, in its life … they feel like they can relate to the rescue dog and they share similar situations, which makes them want to come to the programme each week so they can see and be there for their dog. This makes them feel like they have a responsibility to help the dog, which in turn is helping themselves.

Tessa's account above is reminiscent of Evans and Gray (2012) who suggest that "an animal's experience or life stressor can be used as a form of normalising for a child or young person" (p. 605). Tessa explains

further that the forming of attachments and bonds between young people and animals happens quickly, but that students also need to learn about saying goodbye and letting go of this relationship:

> This is a big thing for the young people – the young person and the dog come on this programme together, work together, both graduate and then they leave the programme and each other. They [the young people] can relate this to their own life and how relationships can come and go, but you can still remember and learn from these relationships and what they've taught you.

The appreciation of human–animal relations was also part of Brooke's learning, like Evans and Gray (2012), she found that client participation in the guided training of rescue dogs and the emphasis on NVC supported them to adapt and develop their social skills.

> Brooke: Being on placement at The ARK was such a contrasting placement setting from my peers. A key learning experience was the value of animals in violence education. I encountered students who had experienced family harm. When these students were paired with a rescue animal, some of whom had similar experiences, to train and care for, these students learned communication skills based on positivity and encouragement. They could apply this to aspects of their lives where they may have been using violence and anger. I've learnt to really observe what's going on and I've taken that strengths-based approach to my practice.

One of the arguments in the literature (related to animal rights and welfare) is about the need to appreciate and acknowledge the reciprocity, skill and work that animals contribute to service provision alongside their human colleagues (Evans & Gray, 2012; Walker et al., 2015; Walker & Tumilty, 2019). Tessa draws attention to this as she reflects on the role of the dogs in the APART programme:

A significant learning experience from co-working with animals was that young people on the programme talk to their dogs about their situation and problems when they do not want to talk to anyone else. And, they were more willing to talk to you about their situation if their dog was next to them. The dogs always suspended judgment and based their relationships on how the young people treated them. They also provided the comfort of physical touch, an aspect that a social worker cannot provide.

The learning opportunity of co-working with animals provided Tessa with new knowledge, experiences, and different personal and professional perspectives. By being present and suspending judgement themselves, these students were open to learning opportunities that extended beyond facilitating AAIs. Reflecting on her own learning during the placement, Brooke adds:

> The ARK animals have the ability to create a sense of calm. This seemed to aid student comfort, which was the catalyst for engagement.

Both Tessa and Brooke came to their placements at The Nelson ARK with an awareness of animal–human relations. However, it is through their placements that the significant role of animals in social service delivery became apparent.

This section concludes with some practical matters relevant to the coordination of the placements at The Nelson ARK. First, students received input from a registered social worker via external supervision—an embedded feature of the NMIT social work programme for all students on placement. Second, given the operational hours of The Nelson ARK are part-time, placements were necessarily comprised of practice-based and related project work. Finally, there was limited scaffolding of specific theory and practice knowledge to prepare students for a placement such as this. It is this final challenge that is less readily remedied when pre-placement attention to human–animal relations remains relatively underdeveloped in the social work curriculum.

Discussion

Literature about animals and social work emphasises the need to adopt a more inclusive stance that embraces the contributions made by non-human animals to social work practice and the lives of our clients (Adamson & Darroch, 2016; Ryan, 2011; Walker et al., 2015). Walker and Tumilty (2019) argued that social service delivery is almost exclusively human-focused and considers humans as separate and distinct from non-human animals. Yet, this constructed divide does not adequately represent the importance of animals in the lives of people—nor does it acknowledge the contributions that animals make to our lives and our professional practices (Walker & Tumilty, 2019).

As Tessa and Brooke have shared, the inclusion of animals into the social work placement experience afforded an innovative opportunity for students to broaden their skills and knowledge of interspecies partnerships. However, a specific theoretical framework through which students might understand, and approach their practice experiences at The Nelson ARK was not predetermined. Walker et al. (2015) argue that there is a need to develop new social work theories that give consideration to animals as family members, companions and co-workers. Links to theory are signposted in relation to a strengths-based approach, NVC and, as Adamson and Darroch (2016) have discussed, a version of attachment theory. Other literature emphasises the presence of animals in the ecologies of the individuals and families who social workers work alongside (Adamson & Darroch, 2016; Arkow, 2020; Evans & Gray, 2012; Risley-Curtiss, 2010; Walker et al., 2015). Moreover, given that attention to recognising the sentience and protection of animals presents as part of the updated Aotearoa

New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) *Code of Ethics* (2019), we may also be moved to acknowledge more fully the contributions of animals to social work practicum and their capacity to shape and strengthen social work practice.

Conclusion

Student placement at The Nelson ARK has provided both students and staff at NMIT with an innovative experience and a deeper appreciation of animals and how they can contribute to social work practice. This is a fertile starting point in the development of more intentional and critical animal-inclusive practices as part of the social work student pathway. Further research into placements involving animal-assisted interventions would be valuable and of interest to field education coordinators, field educators and researchers.

Acknowledgment

We wish to acknowledge that since the writing of this reflective piece, and due to covid-19 impact on funding, that The Nelson ARK has closed its doors after 12 years of service to the Nelson Tasman Region. Thank you Karen and The Nelson ARK team for your achievements and your valuable contributions to our community.

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