

## Building Compassion through Picture Books:

How grade 2 and 5 students and teachers experienced the *AnimalTales* book program

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*April, 2018*

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# Background

In 2017, the Alberta SPCA (AB SPCA) engaged a consultant to determine the *range and nature* of the effectiveness of the existing *AnimalTales* book loan program in increasing empathy in elementary students. *Empathy* was assumed to be demonstrated by students' attitudes as to how animals, people and the environment are, and should be, treated.

The overarching problem guiding the study was: How do elementary school students and teachers experience the Alberta SPCA *AnimalTales* book program, and what is the evidence of the nature of the impact of this program on students? *AnimalTales* is a grade-specific, free-book program created by the ABSPCA to encourage the development of compassion and reverence for every living thing. Teachers request the books and accompanying materials and are then free to use as much or little as they wish, and modify or expand them based on the needs of their students and curricular goals.

External program evaluation is often used by organizations seeking to enhance the quality of their programming, monitor program effectiveness, and improve usage of services. Participant-oriented qualitative evaluation, in particular, uses interviews, observation, and documents in cases where it is important to capture feelings, reactions and behavioural changes that cannot be easily quantified (Metz, 2007; Linnell, Radosevich, & Spack, 2002). All three methods were used by the consultant, with the documents consisting of student work samples and teacher journals.

The data for the study was collected from teachers, students, administrators, and parents in 18 classrooms (15 schools) located throughout rural, urban, and metropolitan settings in northern, central and southern Alberta. At 11 schools, students were described as having a variety of high needs. Classrooms were almost always described as being culturally diverse, regardless of other demographics.

Four major research questions were designed to investigate both the individual and the collective experiences with the *AnimalTales* program. For the purpose of this paper, findings are organized and presented based on student and teacher feedback, rather than the original research questions. There were no significant differences in the findings for north, south or centrally located districts; rural, urban or metro locations; or between male and female participants.

### ROLE OF HUMANE EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

Government approvers of curricula, school districts, and individual teachers are regularly bombarded with requests from legitimate organizations who have important information they wish to disseminate through schools. Among these, humane educators "advocate for and encourage values of compassion, empathy, respect, kindness and positive regard towards all living beings--human and non-human alike"(Caine, 2009, pg. 9). It is the intent of the AB SCPA to do just this, through the *AnimalTales* program.

Having a message that aligns with government, district, and teacher goals and values goes a long way towards acceptance of a requesting organization's materials. Character education initiatives (including humane education) are likely to meet such criteria. As Almerico (2014) points out, they "appear to provide students and teachers with many benefits in the classroom setting and beyond; however, one challenge educator's face is procuring the necessary curriculum materials and background to teach it" (pg 3). An educator-created, curriculum-aligned, free, and easy to use set of materials such as *AnimalTales* may meet such a challenge.

### USE OF LITERATURE

As noted on the everylivingthing website (AB SPCA, n.d.) the *AnimalTales* program consists of picture books organized by grade level - short stories beautifully written and illustrated with a powerful message or theme. All books focus on animals or relationships with them. The books are accompanied by a grade appropriate teacher manual that offers a wide variety and type of cross-curricular activities and discussion topics.

The use of good literature to promote social-emotional learning in young people is well referenced in the literature (Wolk, 2009; Almerico, 2014). As Hall (2000) notes: "Stories engage our sentiments and make us feel deeply about people. Use of literature makes perfect sense to help children foster the ability to imaginatively reach beyond self"(p. vii). Picture books specifically have many advantages for the fostering of empathy in children of all ages (Nikolajeva, 2013; Costello & Kolodziej, 2006). Crawford (2014) notes that:

Picture books provide a particularly effective medium for learning life lessons. Because the plot unfolds and resolves quickly, they can serve as the equivalent of 'case studies' for young children who are learning to tease out important lessons about thinking and acting in a compassionate manner... With support, guidance and opportunities for meaningful language-rich literacy encounters, children can also have the potential to learn the habits

of mind and tangible actions that will help them to act kindly and compassionately in their world. (pg. 171)

Although there is some discussion in the research as to whether human or anthropomorphic characters are better conduits for teaching moral lessons (Larson, Lee & Ganea, 2017; Melson, 2001; Thompson & Gullone, 2003) there is no question that animals are intrinsically of interest to young readers:

Animals can often capture children's attention, imagination and emotions in ways that people-focused subject matter cannot. Teaching abstract concepts like character and compassion can be easier, more engaging, and more fun when animals are the springboard for discussion. (Arkow, 2010, pg. 473)

### Student Perceptions of *AnimalTales*

As Caine (2009) notes "although anyone at any age can learn more humane ways of living, young children are far more flexible in their habits, attitudes and behaviours " (pg.10). Empathy and compassion are essential social skills which normally develop between the ages of four and adolescence (Nikolajeva, 2013). The major goal of humane education with school age children is to help these skills grow beyond self to family, friends, pets, the environment and eventually to the world at large (Jalongo, 2014).

45 grade two and 42 grade five students (46 female, 41 male) were individually interviewed following exposure to *AnimalTales*. Additional information regarding student perceptions was gathered during classroom discussions and from student work samples provided by the teachers. The consultant read a new related book with all students, discussed it, and spent time in the classroom in hopes of increasing comfort levels during individual interviews. Students appeared to be happy to talk, and unworried about expressing their opinions. For example, one student was clear that: "Everything should have a right to live, except for mosquitoes, they have no good purpose, they just bite me"(SF2UN2).

Students in both grades were easily able to talk about kindness and caring in general, and empathy for people, animals and the environment. They could clearly identify times they had been kind or unkind, when someone had been kind or unkind to them as well as how kindness specifically applied to animals.

Students generally stated a desire to be kind to people or animals, even though they pointed out that not all their classmates demonstrated the same.

I was kind to Avery, she had nobody to play with and I went over to see if I could play with her and I think that made her feel very good. I play with her because almost every day her best friend in grade one in grade two never plays with her, so she had no one else, and I asked and she finally got to play with somebody. She felt very happy and I felt happy too. (SF2RS2)

Some students were further moved to consider related charitable or environmental initiatives at the school or community level. These included helping parents with fostering animals, bake and craft sales for the SCPA, and engaging with seniors. An example follows:

## Student Perceptions of Animal Tales

We are still fostering. My mom had to take courses, but now she doesn't have to. She learned how to bottle feed, and then we learned how. And you have to rub their butts so they learn to go pee. You feed them and give them kitty litter. And if they don't get bought they go to the pet store sometimes. It takes a lot of time, but I like it. Otherwise they might be sitting at the shelter forever. (SF2RC2)

At the grade two level, seven different ways to be kind to animals were noted. Not hurting animals, being nice to them, and treating animals the way you would want to be treated were the most frequent responses. At the grade five level, being kind to animals focused on both treating animals as you would want to be treated, and ensuring all their needs were taken care of.

We talked about kindness, a little about people and animals. That people need to be treated the same as animals. Like, animals still need sort of the same things as humans or else they might die. They need food, shelter and water. (SF1UC1)

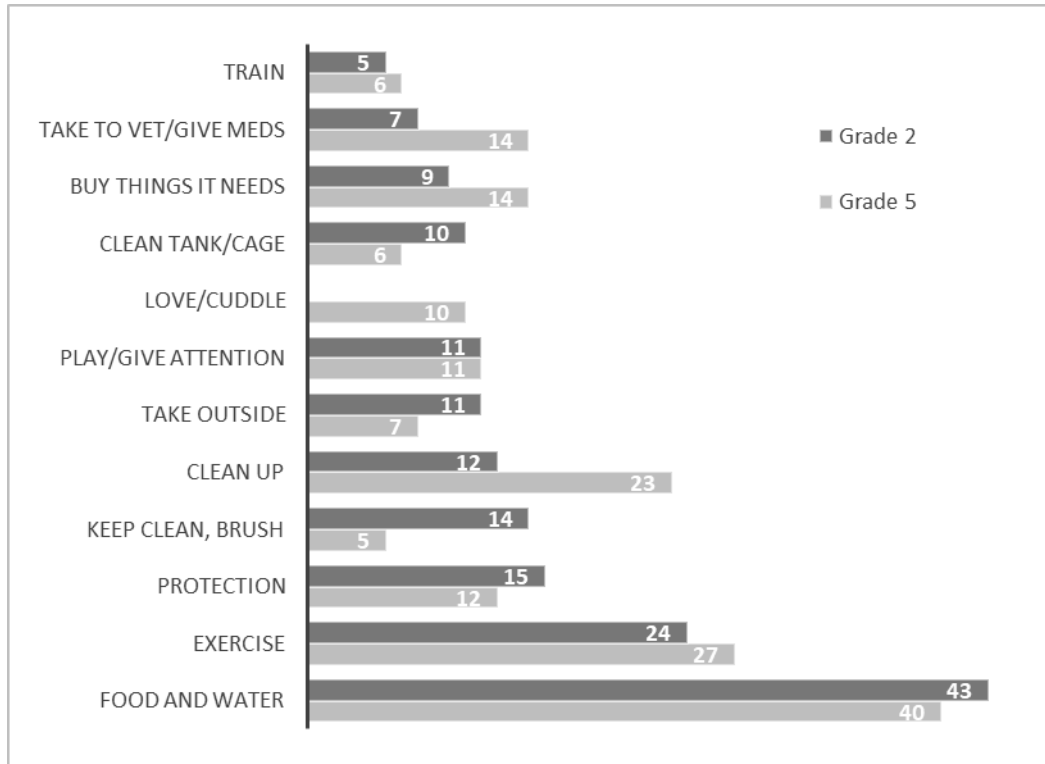
I think the message was that people need to pay more attention to how they are changing the land, and the animals were here before us, so we need to respect their land, because it is not really ours, it is theirs. (SM3RN)

Students reported learning many new things about the responsibilities that come with being a pet owner, and appropriate ways to treat animals:

The books tell you that you should actually take care of your pets. Feed them every day, give them a walk, water. You should treat them very nice. You shouldn't ride on your dog, pull their tails, or pull your cat by the feet, that is not a good pet owner. (SF2RS2)

12 specific responsibilities of a pet owner were identified by students, as demonstrated in Table 1 below. Grade five students revealed higher levels of understanding, as would be expected. Some noted paying for animal needs from allowances or gifts, taking in stray animals, finding them and taking them to a shelter, or reporting poor behaviour with animals by others. They were also more aware of cost items, such as vet care and buying items that pets need.

**Table 1: Pet Owner Responsibilities As Reported By Students**



At both the grade two and five level, very few students commented on classmates acting differently with each other following the lessons, either positively or negatively. They were unable to put a specific cause to any improvements they did see, other than being aware that teacher had worked on caring and kindness all year:

You have to care about every living thing, even plants. She (the teacher) does her point of view on the book after we read it, and we discuss it. If you are kind you are going to have a lot more friends and a lot more living things in your life like pets, plants, and people. (SF1UN2)

Students were unanimously clear that they enjoyed using the books as well as the accompanying materials, although they had different preferences for best or least favourite book and activity. They hoped the teacher would continue using the materials with her next class (or in some cases the next grade's materials with them):



## Student Perceptions of AnimalTales

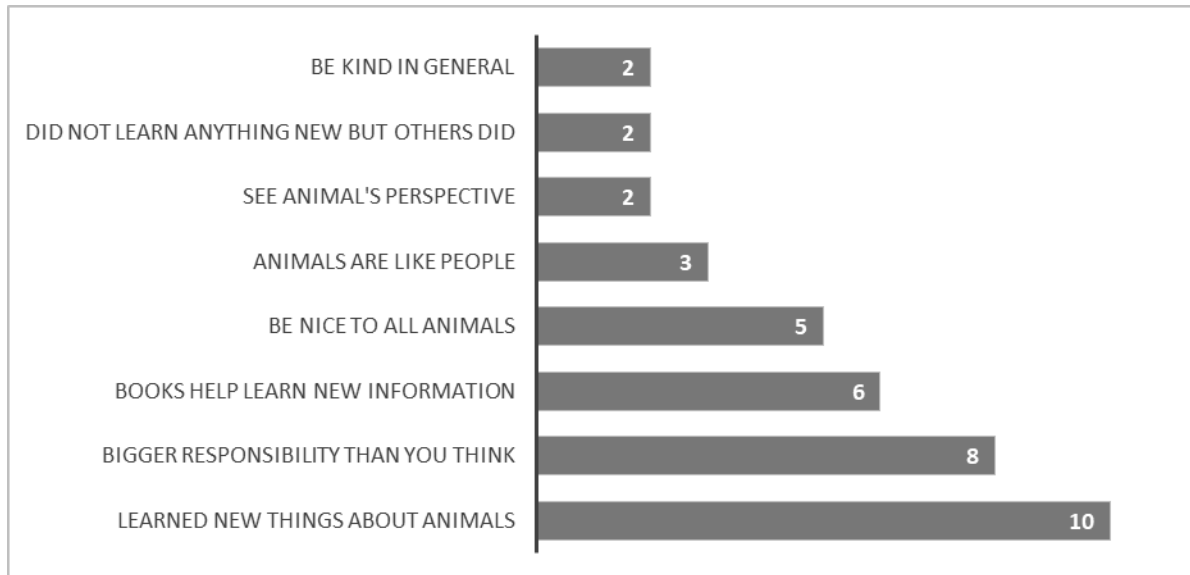
She should do it again next year, because we learned how important animals are to the environment and reading stories helps your brain, and for fun. (SF3MN2)

The majority felt they learned something new about animals and how to treat them, or that their classmates did. The message about compassion was not perceived as stand-alone, it fit with other messages that the teacher and school delivered regularly:

I think most people learned a lot. I don't think there was anybody who didn't learn at least one thing. People should be more aware of the way animals are, they are kind of like people, they are just trying to look after themselves. (SM3RN2)

Because most of them say they don't have animals and they said they've never had an experience with an animal. They were like "you don't need to take horses on trail rides that much," and I was like "yes you do! It's their exercise." (SF3UC1)

**Table 2: Student Summary Comments Regarding New Learning**



Students in both grades could identify the author's message or intent in writing a book, and appreciated the opportunity that some books presented to discuss topics that were new or difficult for them. These ranged from what is a farm (for the many students new to Canada) to divorce, hospice care, and disabilities. Two of many examples follow:

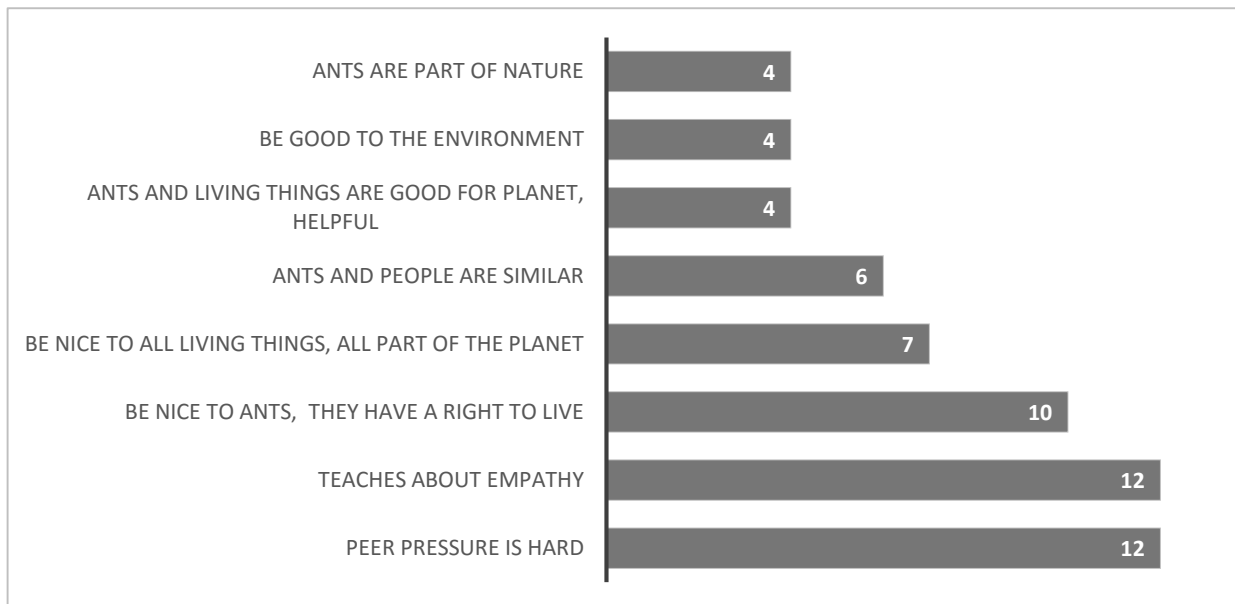
## Student Perceptions of AnimalTales

We talked about peer pressure this year. She said what it is, somebody telling you to do something you know you shouldn't do, and it is hard to say no. Some kids in the class wanted to squish because they just don't like ants. (SM1RC1)

My parents are together. I think the author was trying to say don't feel bad if your parents are not together it is not your fault. (SF2RC2)

Table 3 below is provided as an exemplar of the messages students intuited from one grade two level book, *Hey, Little Ant*:

**Table 3: Student Reflection on *Hey, Little Ant***



## Student Perceptions of AnimalTales

Table 4 below is provided as an exemplar of the messages students intuited from one grade five level book, *How Smudge Came*.

**Table 4: Student Reflection On *How Smudge Came***



Overall, student interviews supported the effectiveness and value of *AnimalTales* in enhancing empathy and kindness in a diverse group of grade two and five students. Effects appeared strongest on attitudes, and an increase in animal-related knowledge.

## Teacher Perceptions of *AnimalTales*

18 teachers, representing 15 different schools and 13 school divisions, participated in this study. Teachers had from one to three years of experience using the *AnimalTales* materials, and from one to more than 10 years of classroom experience.

The importance of the individual teacher and good pedagogy on the overall development of children is well established in research. Related to this study, Bohlin (2005) notes: "While literature teachers cannot control the choices students make outside the classroom, we can help them to become more adept at ethical reflection and hope the practice they acquire doing this will indeed carry over to their own lives" (pg.31).

Teaching students about moral/social issue is never easy, and not accomplished in a one-shot lesson. Palacio (2017) explains:

The tricky part about teaching empathy to children is that you can't really teach it. You can only inspire it. Like its sister words, kindness and compassion, empathy, is wakened in the soul. With very young children it is best to tickle it awake, but it takes a light touch. That's where a good picture book comes in handy. If a child can relate to a character or become immersed in a story, she begins to have feelings outside of her own direct realm of experience. The spark of empathy, delivered gently, can then grow. (pg.24)

The strong links from *AnimalTales* to various existing in-school character education programs were noted by principals and teachers at all but the two schools which had no other official program. The school focus was often enhanced by various activities or student recognition programs, some of which were SPCA related:

Every classroom has done some sort of an activity. So the grade fives actually did an SPCA fundraiser. And they bought some treats and toys and different things to take down to the SPCA, and had an awesome trip down there. (TUC1)

The buy-in of teachers is key to the success of any literature based program. As Costello and Kolodziej (2006) note: "One of the first and most important issues to take into account is the teacher's personal enthusiasm for the book" (pg.28). All teachers reported using *AnimalTales* to be a positive experience for them as an educator, and for their students. They found the books engaging, the manual accessible, the activities good on

their own, and the materials easily extended. Five teachers noted that the program appealed because of the use of picture books in particular, no matter the grade level:

I used the materials because I like reading to kids, I liked the different content material, special needs, the responsibility of having a pet, even the duck book. People on farms have to be aware of animals although their livelihood is number one. (TMN2)

Problem solving, we branched out with that. In the guide it suggests that you can problem solve, like: “What do you do if your dog chews up socks? What do you do if your dog pees on the floor?” Those kinds of things. We talked about that. But then we took that further and talked about problem solving on the playground. What do you do if someone says, “No you can’t play with me or they take a ball away”? (TUN3) Teachers first and foremost wished to achieve Alberta Education curricular outcomes, using materials that would engage students. Along with general content area goals, 12 teachers noted specific outcomes that were achieved related to meeting the needs of English Language Learners (ELL) in their classrooms, and the desire for more future focus on this area:

It is really strong in the cross-curricular. The writing opportunities are good, and it connected in different ways to the survey topics in math. It connects to art, to health, most definitely. I can do extensions on the writing too because I can revisit this a few times during the year, it is something you can always connect back to. (TUN4)

Second, teachers wished to address kindness, caring and social- emotional growth in students. Materials were universally reported to be well aligned with Alberta curriculum and school/district goals in this area. The increased understanding of related vocabulary that arose from the books assisted teachers in guiding student interactions, or problem resolution:

Empathy is the biggest one, because that’s always reinforced. “What are we talking about here?” and they’ll say “empathy.” They never would have had that word before, but that to me is huge. When you can get that language in, and hopefully it becomes something that stays with them. I think you can see a difference in kids, how they relate to animals, and how they can relate to people. (OUN3)

We talked about how animals are such a great emotional support too. They are there to give us comfort and make us feel good if we are feeling sad. It gives me goose bumps to see the kids talk about it and relate to it, because I think kids in general are very compassionate, I think it is a learned behaviour not to be caring for animals and other people. (TRS3)

Like students, teachers generally found it hard to attribute any behavioural changes in students specifically to *AnimalTales* participation; there were too many intervening factors. Seven teachers specifically noted no observable changes in behaviour. When such occurred, it was seen as the cumulative result of efforts in the school, classroom and home: "Kindness grows in the classroom over the year, respect for each other, different ways of approaching people, less violence, going from hitting to words." (TMC2)

11 teachers specifically chose to use the programming because of the focus on kindness, empathy and being a caring person:

- Just knowing your math, as good as it is, if you are not a kind person, it might not get you very far. (TUN2)
- Since we are a Catholic school we are always talking about kindness and making a good choice, the best choice they can make. It reinforces it. We just transferred it to animals, what would you do as a good choice? (TMC3)
- With each other, there are some students who are fairly selfish and entitled, so when there is a conflict, it is very "you did this to me". Every day I have to walk the kids through how the other person has felt. (TRC2)
- A combination of need in the class and good practice. Earlier in the year there were some definite bullying issues, so it helped with that, some peer group tension, typical grade 5 stuff. (TUN1)

As the *everylivingthing* website (AB SPCA, n.d.) states, effective character education must go beyond simply reading humane themed stories. Students who engage in reflection, discussion and analysis are more likely to understand and apply values in a healthy way. 11 teachers commented positively on the discussion value of materials. The importance of all forms of life was a theme common to many classrooms, especially those which were faith-based. Two rather unique examples of discussion topics follow:

We had some interesting discussions about what to do with stray animals. Some students said that we should just leave them alone, some said to call the SPCA and some said bring them into their

homes. We discussed pros and cons. The food scraps question was interesting too. Most of the kids were saying that we should always feed animals from the table, so I had to bring up the point that some foods can be poisonous to animals. As soon as they heard that, a lot of them changed their minds. (TUC1)

Our best class was when we compared ants and people and came to the conclusion that the more we know about something or someone, the more we understand them and have feelings for them. We extended that to people we meet in our classes from other schools or countries. If we know them we will be able to understand them and have empathy for them (TUN3)

13 teachers reported the animal focus to be a draw. (Many teachers were animal lovers themselves, increasing the appeal).

Having resources with animals as the focus helps the kids transfer the concept of kindness back and forth between animals and people. We can focus on treating all living things with kindness and how you treat animals how you treat others, treat others as you want to be treated. (TMC2)

I think it is so, so important to expose children to animals, to be compassionate and caring for other living things, to learn responsibility, respect, kindness. The program is so well laid out. (TRS3)

Six teachers noted that students had a greater understanding of the responsibilities of pet ownership as a result of *AnimalTales* participation.

They changed their minds about what a responsible pet owner would be based on the stories we read. Many began by believing pets didn't really need much. We would get some answers of "Oh, I can leave my dog at home for a few days and it's okay." And as we kept going through, it was, "wait a sec, oh I can't do that." They started to understand that animals do need more than I think they need, they have a personality too, they need comfort. They need a lot of the things that we need. (TUC1)

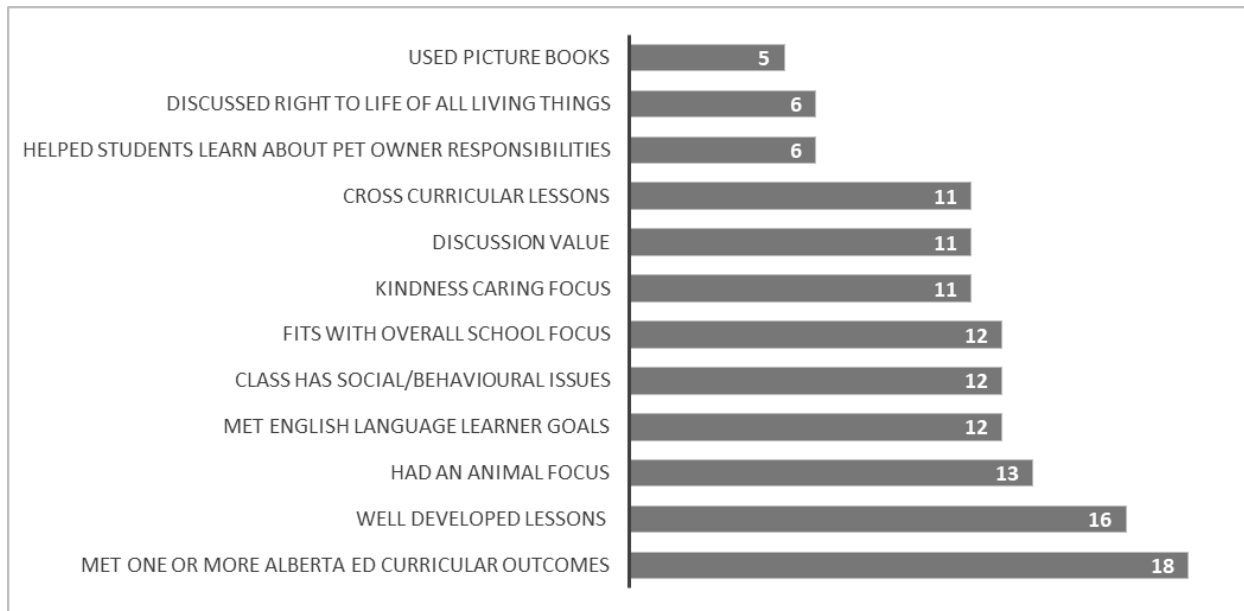
I had one girl who is very, very quiet, and she doesn't say anything or stick up for anyone, and she came in one morning and she said "last night my dog did something bad and my dad spanked him and I got mad at my dad." I asked what her dad said, and she said,

## Teacher Perceptions of AnimalTales

"he listened and he stopped." I was like, good. It was good for her.  
(TRN1)

The table that follows summarized the comments of teachers as to the reasons they chose to use the program:

**Table 5: Reasons Teachers Used the Materials**



The consensus from teachers was: "It is what the teacher does with the content and conversation that will make the difference. I love it, I love that it is free and that it is quality" (TRC2). School leadership support, and alignment with district objectives were both noted as helpful precursors to teachers being able to offer an effective program. All teachers stated they would plan to use the program again next year, in the right circumstances (eg. teaching an appropriate grade):

The students were very attentive during the reading. Which is surprising because they can get easily distracted at times, but I think the length of the book was good and the subject was interesting. Even if you don't have a pet, you have seen animals. We have students have different backgrounds, but everybody could say something. I enjoyed it, I would do it again, I liked the choice of books. (TMC4)



# Conclusion

Ongoing evaluation is a key part of providing information about current reality so that organizations can envision the future (Linnell, Radosevich & Spack, 2002). This study attempted to review the specific ongoing value of the *AnimalTales* program, and to more generally inform the AB SPCA and other interested organizations as to the value and effectiveness of a supported, literature-based, humane education program offered to elementary age students.

Jalongo (2014) states that:

The major mission of humane education is to widen each child's circle of empathy...the objective of humane education is an abiding respect for all forms of life, a capacity to identify with suffering, and a sense of responsibility for protecting the environment. (pg. xv)

Students at both grade levels reported learning about compassion, kindness and how others, including animals, are impacted by their actions. This occurred both through the use of the books and activities, and the efforts of the teacher to engage them in the work. Teachers indicated that there was significant evidence of new knowledge and understandings by students regarding empathy and caring for animals, people and the environment.

Both students and teachers pointed to *AnimalTales* as being a program that is easily embraced for the choice of literature, the supporting content, and the ease of access. It worked particularly well in combination with already existing efforts to help students learn and practice compassion for all living things.

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