

BOOK DOG AND ASTRID LINDGREN

A Project to Promote Reading

Helene Ehriander

*“A childhood without books would not be
a childhood.”
Astrid Lindgren*

The project “Book Dog and Astrid Lindgren” at Linnaeus University, Sweden, aims to bring children together with literature and to use dogs as a tool for this. The project seeks to arouse a desire to read by making it appealing, and to spread knowledge about children’s literature in general and Astrid Lindgren’s works in particular. It is geared towards children with difficulties in reading, writing, and speech, children with low motivation for reading, children who already find it fun to read and who are prepared to read more, and adults who are in contact with these children. The method involves the children reading aloud to a dog that makes no demands or judgements. The dog has a calming effect in a situation that is stressful for many children. The project is run in collaboration with the Swedish

dyslexia association Dyslexiförbundet, the Hundsam¹ association, and schools and libraries, primarily focusing on children aged between 6 and 13.

Background

In April 2013, Linnaeus University obtained 8 million kronor from Allmänna Arvsfonden (the Swedish Inheritance Fund) through Helene Ehriander, a lecturer specializing in children’s literature, and the high school teacher Anna Nilsson, for the three-year project “Book Dog and Astrid Lindgren”. The overall goal for the project is to establish *The Book Dog* in Sweden.

When we started the project, we had already been working with our dogs in our leisure time to help children with autism. We discovered how the dog functioned as a motivator and how we could use it to arouse interest and ensure calm in a learning situation. A boy who had not spoken for many

years suddenly began to talk to the dog, and another boy began just as suddenly to read a book that he had brought along himself, because he thought the dog might like that particular story. On one occasion, yet another boy got angry with a dog because she had touched her teeth against his fingers and he claimed that she had bitten him. When he came to the reading session the next time, he hugged the dog and told her he was sorry for getting so angry, and his mother said that she had tried for several years to explain to him what “sorry” meant but he had not understood until then.

Programmes to promote literacy by letting a child read aloud to a specially trained dog and its handler have become increasingly popular in many countries, above all in the USA and Britain, through an organization called R.E.A.D. (Reading Education Assistance Dogs). In Sweden, the word *läshund* (reading dog) was included in the list of new words for 2012 by the Swedish Academy, after the media had been alerted to the methods used by this organization. It is a method intended both to improve literacy and to encourage pleasure in reading by letting children practise reading aloud, in a structured way, to dogs who act as non-judgemental listeners. In the read-

ing situation, the dog handler should be able to meet the children at the stage where they are in their reading development, and with the help of the dog give the support the child needs just then in order to make reading easier and associate it with something nice: The dog functions as a motivator and the children look forward to the reading exercises. The dog provides a sense of security and serves as a reward, and the dog handler, with the aid of the dog, can assist the child to a deeper understanding of texts. The situation thus helps to associate reading with positive feelings (see Jalongo 2005 and 2014). In later reading situations when the dog is not present, the memory of the dog can make reading and the reading situation calm and more relaxed for the child.

In the USA, reading dogs are part of a system with volunteers that we do not have in Sweden. This project has therefore been considerably adapted and developed to suit Swedish conditions. In several other countries, the dog handlers trained in R.E.A.D. work for no pay, but in the Book Dog project we are trying to get pedagogical service dogs into the schools chiefly by training teachers and librarians as dog handlers. We have also shaped the project to conform with our school and library system and Swedish

cultural and literary heritage in such a way that it cannot be considered as a part of R.E.A.D., although we have been in contact with them and are inspired by their work. Moreover, the project "Book Dog and Astrid Lindgren" is in line with the four main principles of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child (see www.humanium.org/en/childrens-rights-history/references-on-childrens-rights/declaration-rights-child/) and follows the guidelines drawn up by the Asthma and Allergy Association (see <http://astmaoallergiforbundet.se/>).

During the first two years of the project we trained 20 dogs and their handlers and started working in

several schools. A test for selecting suitable dogs has been carefully designed. The dogs are tested on several points for two hours so that we can select those most stable, secure, and interested in working. For safety reasons, children are not included in the testing. Our test follows the argument in *Education Assistance Dogs: A Program of Intermountain Therapy Animals* that working as a reading dog is perfect for a dog that is calm and quiet, and that likes to be scratched and patted. The dog should be relaxed, silent, attentive, and able to work with people at floor level. It should be able to deal with unexpected situations if it ends up in a group with several



children. The dog should be willing to obey and be interested in learning new things. Sudden loud noises should not distress it, nor should it worry about school bells, dressing-up outfits, or if a child should wave a glove puppet in front of its nose. The dog should be tolerant, accepting when children touch, tug at or lean up against it. It should not sniff for sweets in waste-paper bins, and it should stay calm if there are other animals nearby. The dog handler must like children and books and be willing to read children's literature. He or she must also have an interest in what it is like to be a child, understand the world in which children live, and remember the names of the children and what they tell about themselves. Patience is important, as are flexibility, empathy, and an intuitive feeling about the child. In addition, the dog handler must of course be willing to work with his or her dog, have fun with it, train it, and be "the dog's advocate" in situations where that might be necessary.

The project "Book Dog and Astrid Lindgren" has developed parts of the R.E.A.D. programme and devised a one-year adapted training course for both the dogs and their handlers so that they can become an effective team for the purpose. To be admitted to the

course, the dog handler, besides satisfying the requirements mentioned above, needs to be an active reader and interested in methods of teaching literature which can contribute to greater reading comprehension. It is of the utmost importance that all training with the dogs is based on pleasure, cooperation, and respect, so that they feel secure in their work with the children and so that they can also cope with working with and supporting children with diagnoses of various types. The training comprises dog knowledge, educational attitudes, dog training, and teaching children's literature and how to present it in an interesting way for young readers. After completing training, the book dogs should have learned 35 items such as following the index finger of a reading child, giving a reading child an encouraging push with the nose or laying down with the head in a child's lap. They have to be able to perform these when the dog handler signals what they are to do and thus do not need to interrupt the reading by talking to the dog. The dogs should be able to work without reward, in order to avoid being distracted by treats during the reading. It is thus not enough that the dog can lie still; it must also be able to interact, for example, by an encouraging nudge if

a child stumbles in the reading, or following with its eyes the finger that many children run under the text as they read. The training ends with certification when the dogs have completed their practice, and they must be able to demonstrate that they have learned all the items on the course.

Besides being inspired by Astrid Lindgren's humanist values, the training should also be in line with the current curriculum for compulsory school and the fundamental values advocated there. The training is also permeated by a gender and diversity perspective, which enables everyone to receive an equal education irrespective of their circumstances. It is important that every aspect of the project is well thought-through and of consistent high quality. Given the steadily declining reading results of Swedish children, it is important to let the training of the dogs and the development of the method take time for the results to be as good as possible in the long term.

Reading as a democratic issue

Reading and being allowed to read are human rights. Reading is a democratic issue and an essential condition for participation in society if people are to be able to have any influence over

their own lives, their environment, and the development of society as a whole. Moreover, reading can be a source of profound and lasting joy. In Astrid Lindgren's spirit, we want to uphold the outlook on children, literature, and animals that she advocated, and the humanist and democratic values expressed in her life and works. Over ten years after Lindgren's death, when a new generation of children has been born and in a time when more and more people are not reading her books but contenting themselves with seeing the film adaptations of her works, we want to create an increased interest in the cultural heritage that Lindgren's books constitute, and the reading of children's literature by other authors. Lindgren herself believed reading to be a force for children's right to freely develop their imagination and creativity, and to ultimately lead to a democratic society. "Everything great that happened in the world happened first in some person's imagination," Astrid Lindgren wrote in an article in the school library journal *Skolbiblioteket* in 1958. Throughout her life, Lindgren was a true ambassador of reading. She often testified as to how much books and reading had meant for her thinking, her development and, not least of all, her own writing. Lindgren has also pleaded in

several contexts for the shared pleasure of reading aloud, for example, in a folder issued by Svensk Boktjänst, “Att växa upp med böcker” (Growing up with books) from 1957, where she writes that reading aloud is “sheer entertainment” and that it contributes to a wonderful sense of community where people can share laughter and tears:

You don't only need to laugh and cry. A book that you have read together can be a starting point for many rewarding conversations about things that you might not otherwise have touched on: life and death, right and wrong, relational problems and outlooks on life, everything under the sun. And even if you don't read aloud very long, it's enough to have fun together.

A great deal has been written in recent years about children's declining interest in reading, their deteriorating reading results, and the consequences this can have. There are many suggestions as to how school can remedy this problem, and everyone seems to agree that Swedish teacher education must be improved so that the status of the profession is enhanced and salaries are raised. The results of the major surveys of reading such as PISA and PIRLS have attracted considerable attention in Swedish media, and the

results of the participating countries are compared. Ulf Fredriksson and Karin Taube add nuance to the discussion in their book *Läsning, läsvanor och läsundersökningar* (i.e. Reading, Reading Habits, and Reading Surveys). They discuss the effect of factors such as age, gender, socio-economic background, and native language, and they examine questions about reading habits and the role of school. They highlight central issues such as how Swedish children read compared with children in other countries, how reading has changed over time, and what the differences could conceivably be attributed to. Knowledge of this kind is valuable for anyone working to promote reading.

The Swedish government inquiry into literature from 2012 takes an overall approach, and the problem of the decline in reading is discussed and analysed by experts in the field. Ulf Fredriksson presents the results of the PISA survey and notes that Swedish 15-year-olds read much worse in 2009 than they did in 2000, and since that report was written there have been updated surveys and results demonstrating the continued deterioration in reading ability and reading comprehension (see Fredriksson 95–110). Monica Rosén writes in her article “Förändringar i läsvanor och läsför-

måga bland 9- till 10-åringar: Resultat från internationella studier” (Changes in Reading Habits and Reading Ability among 9- to 10-Year-Olds: Results from International Studies) that there has been a drop in reading performance, which can be explained in large measure by

changed reading habits with less reading for pleasure and less interest in reading as a consequence of increased computer use in leisure time. The negative association between increased computer use and declining results in reading tests should not be viewed as a natural necessity. (137)

Monica Rosén works from the concept of “reading literacy”, which includes both the ability to reflect on what one has read and reading as a tool to be used for achieving individual and societal goals.

The concept of reading literacy includes not only reading ability but also attitudes to reading, interest in reading, reading habits, and self-image, which are also influenced by the home environment and other contexts outside school. (113)

She argues that the ability to read and to assimilate text are two of the most important skills that children have to



Helene Ehriander with book dog Arabella

acquire in the early years of school. They are the foundation for learning in all subjects, and can be used both in recreation and for personal development. Rosén continues:

The information- and knowledge-intensive society in which we live makes great demands on good reading ability. A person who cannot read or finds it difficult to read runs a high risk of doing badly. Being able to read with good comprehension can therefore be considered to be a human right, just as much as it is an individual and societal necessity. (111)

Magnus Persson, a professor of literature at Malmö University, focuses on the government inquiry on literature teaching in school and cites three key concepts which he thinks are “productive starting points for discussing why people should read: democracy, narrative imagination, and creative reading” (175–176). He then links these to the double mission of school: knowledge and democracy. The goal of reading literature, according to Magnus Persson, should be to create critically thinking citizens of the world, and it is in this light that the project “Book Dog and Astrid Lindgren” should ultimately be viewed.

The funds obtained by the project are intended to finance the activities and must primarily be used for the benefit of the children involved. Since there is relatively little research in the field, our idea was that, while running the project, we could simultaneously generate and collect research material which would allow the book dog activities to be researched in the future from many different angles. We hope that several research projects will emerge from the ongoing work, and that we will be able to attract interested researchers from different disciplines. At Linnaeus University the research group CHILLL (Childhood



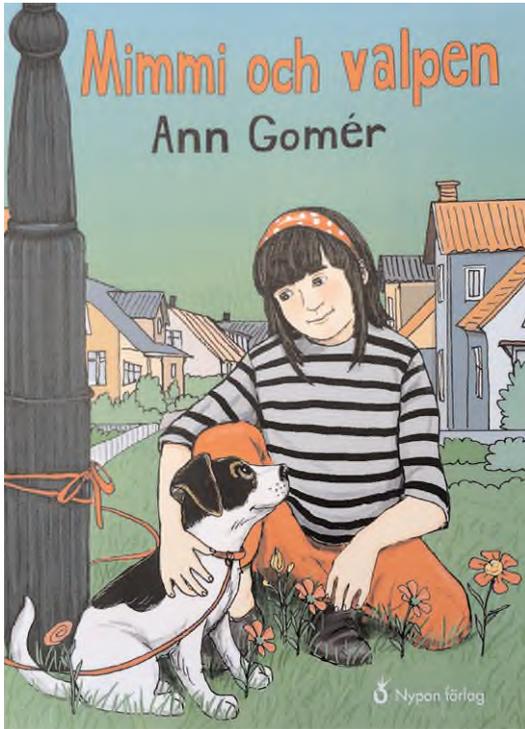
Research in Literature, Language and Learning) assembles scholars in the humanities conducting research on childhood, children's literature, children's film, child language development and learning. CHILL also contributes to furthering research in teacher education and educational science. Research into the book dog activity therefore fits very nicely with the profile of the group and its sphere of interest. A research field that has been expanded in recent years is "human-animal studies", in particular when it comes to the relationship between humans and dogs (see Marvin/McHugh; McCardle et al.).

The project is thus in dialogue with current research in education, literacy learning, linguistics, book dissemination, children's literature, ethology, and the research being conducted on the beneficial effects of animals on humans. Ever since the "Book Dog and Astrid Lindgren" project started, it has been important that everyone involved in it should constantly document their work by keeping a log and filming, so that we will have a proper corpus of research material in the future. Another exciting type of future research material is the evaluation of the book dog activities that the children contribute by doing drawings and writing letters to the dogs. From this material

it is obvious, for example, that the children appreciate the dogs listening to them as they read, and that they felt that they established a secure relationship with the dogs. We are convinced that the research findings will ultimately generate evidence for the benefit of the work we are doing, and we hope that this will lead to a more widespread adoption of this method.

The Reading Situation

Reading with children as proposed by the project "Book Dog and Astrid Lindgren" means that the reading can never become mechanical, nor can it be forced. Reading together with a book dog offers a wealth of possibilities, spontaneity and freedom, which create completely new patterns of social interaction (see Briggs; Friesen 2009, 2010). Lori Friesen, who obtained her doctorate in 2012 at the University of Alberta with a dissertation entitled *Grade 2 Children Experience A Classroom-based Animal-assisted Literacy Mentoring Program: An Interpretive Case Study*, investigated how children experienced reading together with a dog team, what these reading sessions meant for them, what the relationship to the dogs was like both for children who read in school and for those who came into contact with the dogs in



The children often choose to read books featuring dogs, claiming that the dogs will probably appreciate listening to stories about other dogs.

connection with special support. Friesen’s conclusion is that

animal-assisted literacy mentoring programs can offer children valuable forms of social, emotional, and academic support in the classroom context. Specifically, four main themes emerged inductively from the data: (1) Animal-assisted literacy sessions drew the consistent and enthusiastic participation of all of the children in the classroom and were viewed as anticipated escapes from typical

school routines; (2) These sessions invited playful, imaginative literacy teaching and learning opportunities for group participants; (3) Novel and familial modes of interrelationship within these sessions transformed the network of relationships among group members, and finally; (4) The students’ positive, transformative associations with literacy in the broader school context and in their home literacy lives collectively contributed to a carnivalesque climate of literacy support.

The children who read to book dogs as part of the “Book Dog and Astrid Lindgren” project are children who, for various reasons, need training in reading or simply want to read more and better of their own free will. At

one of the schools involved with the project, all the children in a couple of classes have read to the dogs during one term, while at another school the dogs are used as special assistance for children with reading difficulties. All the children get to meet the dog and the dog handler at their own pace and on their own terms. There is no need for comparison with other children as regards the stage they have reached in their reading development, and their reading together with the book dog is

supposed to be comfortable and pleasurable, without demands. In this way all children get help at the right level from a non-judgemental dog and a positively inclined adult who is interested in sharing a reading experience with them. During the project period the book dogs are in the project schools during school hours and at specially arranged events. In spring 2014, for example, pupils from a school in Helsingborg read to book dogs at the Dunker Culture House in connection with an exhibition about the winner of the ALMA Prize, Barbro Lindgren, and in summer 2015, children in Landskrona will have a summer holiday activity at the library where they can experience what it is like to read to a book dog. In autumn 2015 we will focus on books by Astrid Lindgren, as it is 70 years since the first book about Pippi Longstocking appeared.

Before the children start reading to the book dogs, we come and tell them about the dogs and how the reading is arranged, and they also have the opportunity to ask questions. We show pictures of the dogs and what they do when they are not working as book dogs. I myself often tell them about my dog Arabella, who used to be a street dog in Spain and who came to Sweden by air, with her own passport, after I had chosen her for adoption.

Arabella had previously been in a cage at a dogs' home. "Nobody would want a dog as ugly as that," said everyone who walked past. This upsets many children; one girl said, "It doesn't matter what you look like! Arabella has a heart of gold and that's what's important!" I also tell them about my dog Tripod, who is adopted from Portugal and who is missing one foreleg and an eye but can still cope very well. I show pictures of how Tripod jumps around together with dog friends and no one thinks of the fact that he has just three legs. Talking about the dogs in this way gives an opportunity to discuss important values and the right of everyone to be who they are.

The reading session lasts about thirty minutes. The child first chats a little with the dog and then we get the child to talk about the book. I usually begin by checking that the child remembers and understands what we read the previous time: "Arabella says that she doesn't really remember what happened in the first chapter. Can you tell her so that she can keep up?" If it is a new book we are about to begin, I can say: "Arabella wants to look at the cover. Can you tell her what kind of book you are going to read?" In the reading situation, the dog handler works consciously to facilitate communication with the child with the aid

of the dog and contributes to increased reading comprehension by bringing the dog into the conversation. For example, the dog handler can talk on behalf of the dog, e.g. by asking: “I don’t think Bella knows what that word means, shall we help each other to explain it to her?” or “Bella doesn’t understand whether this is a good or a bad person, can you tell her?” In this way the dog handler can converse with the child with the help of the dog, which removes much of the stress from the situation and contributes to positive results (see Tannen 399–417). Through this method the children can have the pleasure of feeling competent and able to take responsibility, since they are always better readers than the book dog! It is fun to see how the reading situation

turns into a play situation where everyone has agreed that the dog “understands”. After the reading is finished, the child can play a game with the dog, for example hiding treats under upturned mugs. Then the dog has to rest on its own for about twenty minutes before the next child comes. One dog can read with three children in one day and on no more than two or three days a week.

Positive Effects

Several studies have been conducted to see how the presence of dogs and the interaction with them reduces children’s stress, as measured through the level of cortisol in their saliva (see Uvnäs-Moberg). Since children often experience reading, especially reading



A drawing for book dog Bella from one of the children participating in the project

Book dog Arabella before a reading session. She is already wearing the vest that indicates to her and the child that she is “on duty” (logo-type created by Sissel Almgren).



aloud, as stressful, the presence of the dog helps to make them more relaxed and thus more secure in the situation. Company and interaction with a dog reduce the children’s blood pressure and pulse to normal levels and reduce other signs of anxiety (see Friedmann/Thomas/Eddy). Working with animals is highly effective for pupils with concentration difficulties and/or behavioural problems (see Katcher/Wilkins; Kaufmann). Our first documented observations have also shown that the positive effects on the child remain for several hours after the reading session; a child with concentration difficulties finds it easier to focus on tasks in other subjects during

the rest of the school day after having read to a book dog. We have also witnessed pupils taking out a photo of the dog when they have to do school work that they find troublesome, as “being reminded of the dog” gives them support.

The dog strengthens children’s confidence in their own ability and hence also their self-esteem, as Anna Nilsson demonstrated in her degree project “Without the Dog I Would Have Been Someone Else” on the programme for vocational teachers at Linnaeus University. The study focuses on how the pupils’ social development is affected by the contact with the dogs, how participation in class is affected by being

Bella at work at the library Landskrona



with the dogs, and how this is significant for the pupils' own learning. Being in the company of the dogs satisfies many physical and mental needs, and by using dogs in school, pupils can be motivated and willing to take part in class, even if they find this difficult. The dog can be a supportive aid in giving the pupils confidence to speak in various school situations, which can lead to increased self-confidence and emotional control. Pupils who are used to being with animals show more empathy for other people, an important property for work with the fundamental values of the school system. Young people who have looked after animals feel greater responsibility than those who have not had animals around them. The

responsibility of owning an animal often has a positive effect on the sense of responsibility that is required for pupils to be able to plan their studies and their schooling. The ability to create and maintain social relations can be developed in different ways with the help of contact with animals. The increase in self-confidence and self-esteem is reflected in the pupil's school work. Concentration improves, with the

consequence that overall study results become better (see Nilsson 3).

In this context, dogs are not unique. Other animals are used in the R.E.A.D. programme, such as rabbits, tortoises, parrots, and guinea pigs. There is also the occasional cat, but their independent spirit makes them less suited for the purpose. The advantage of a dog in the reading situation is that it can be trained and it has the ability to do what it is told. A dog can lie still and look as if it is listening, it can follow an index finger as the reading child moves it under the line, and it can act in such a way that the child feels the dog is participating. A guinea pig just sits there and thus fills an important function, but a trained dog can interact in a way that a guinea pig is

incapable of. There is nevertheless a possibility here that children can be encouraged to read aloud at home to whatever animal they have near them.

Studies show that uncertain children, including those with emotional difficulties, become calmer and can withstand stress better with a (friendly) dog than with a friendly human being in a socially stressful situation (see Uvnäs-Moberg). The children had more bodily contact with the dog, were more active and emotionally expressive, than with a person. The more the child patted and talked to the dog, the lower were the levels of cortisol. The dog was thus a more effective support than a person for the children in handling social stress, which reading aloud can also entail. This, of course, applies not only to children. Dog handlers in the R.E.A.D. department in Orlando, which Merilee Kelley heads and which I visited, have read together with young men who had managed to go through their entire schooling without learning to read properly. When they had a dog to read to, the knot was untied in a way that was almost magical, and they asked in surprise, as they found they were able to link one letter with the next while patting a dog: "Is it really this easy?" In a German project where dogs were used to help school children with

reading difficulties, it was shown that pupils who had read with the dog (compared with a control group who had read without a dog) had greater and more lasting school-related feelings of self-esteem and that they had greater motivation to continue reading on their own after the project ended (see Beetz et al.).

The project "Sit Stay Read", together with the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) Center for Literacy, has created a curriculum using dogs and their handlers to help children in the inner-city schools and community facilities of Chicago to increase their literacy. In her doctoral dissertation, Dr Corinne Serra Smith has analysed and evaluated the effectiveness of the programme in improving pupils' engagement and literacy. By using the oral reading test DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) for three years, Smith has demonstrated a statistically significant difference among second-graders who trained with a "Sit Stay Read" programme and those who trained without it; the children who had read with a dog scored on average 20% higher on the DIBELS test than the control group (Smith 72–85).

In Mary Renck Jalongo's article in the journal *Childhood Education*, she examines the outcome of a two-year

project in which pupils read aloud to a dog (the R.E.A.D. programme). She says that the results are promising. The principal and a social worker at the school had identified the participating children as pupils at risk of having academic difficulties, and two culturally diverse groups of ten pupils aged five to nine were tested. All the participating children noticeably improved their reading skills. Other indications of positive development were that the children were absent from school less often, used the school library more often, and obtained better overall grades in school (see Jalongo 2005).

There are many programmes with dogs that do not work directly or solely with literacy. The programmes often focus on children with autism or ADHD/ADD, and children and adolescents with different risk behaviours. In these contexts it has been shown that the presence of the dog and the interaction with it gives these children lower levels of stress, greater empathy and social skills, and enhanced self-confidence (see Fine). Research also shows that dogs can increase motivation (see Hayes Swift), help children to pay attention, and improve their ability to carry on working with a task, even when it is difficult and challenging for them (see Granger et al.; Gunter, Heimlich).

Existing research in the field thus arrives at similar positive results. There is great interest in the “Book Dog and Astrid Lindgren” project, and we look forward to the coming years when we continue to train dog teams, work with the dogs at schools and libraries, collect and analyse research material, and evaluate the project.

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NOTES

¹ Hundsam is a non-profit association seeking to create a platform for the development of service dogs used as an educational resource in schools and other activities. Hundsam is aimed at associations and companies working in the field, people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), their families and people working with ASD. Hundsam focuses on the developmental effects that a dog can have for people with ASD.

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Thanks to SKK/Agria's research foundation