

An Exploration of Therapy Dogs in Educational Settings as Told Through the Experiences of Multiple Stakeholders

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Review of Related Literature

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943, 1954) is a motivation theory grounded in the basic needs of all humans. The theoretical framework for this study is anchored in a revised interpretation of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943, 1954) designed to explain human growth and potential through the dichotomy between Security Needs and Growth Needs (Kaufman, 2020). Due to various events or sources of stress and trauma in an individual's life, people need additional support with security needs. Support for security needs can be explained through the constructs of attachment, social emotional learning, and coping. Gee, Griffin, and McCradle (2017) conducted a systematic review of literature related to human and animal interaction, finding that the use of animals in school settings provided clear implications of how animals facilitate social interaction and therefore indirectly affect social-emotional development and learning. When students participate in social and emotional learning initiatives in school, these activities contribute to an overall support plan to develop coping skills (Child Mind, 2016; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Shigemoto & Robitschek, 2020). Binfet, Passamore, Cebry, Struik, and McKay (2018) concluded that canine-assisted therapy provides an opportunity to safeguard students' mental well-being, particularly through stress-reduction. Therapy dogs might present an alternative tool to assist in managing stressful situations for one's specific internal or external demands.

Research Design

This study will address a need for qualitative research in the field of animal assisted interventions to understand how the services are experienced by the individuals. Two research questions will guide the inquiry: (a) How are therapy dogs in educational settings operationalized? (b) What are the experiences of individuals who engage in therapy dog services? The investigation will use a qualitative multi-case study design, where a case will be defined as the role of specific individuals related to therapy dog services. The study is bound by the different roles of the individuals related to therapy dog services. The target population represents four distinct groups: (a) therapy dog representatives affiliated with specific organizations, (b) therapy dog handlers affiliated with specific organizations, (c) school/personnel site coordinator, (d) students who are current or recent participants in the service. The core method for data collection will utilize semi-structured interviews, with at least one interview per individual who provides consent/assent. Data analysis will employ inductive, comparative open coding to start, followed by axial coding to generate themes or categories.

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