AN EXPLORATION OF THERAPY DOGS IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS AS DESCRIBED THROUGH THE EXPERIENCES OF MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS

Lauren A. Moyer
Social Studies Teacher, Fairfield, CT
Dissertation Chairperson: Marcia Delcourt, Ph.D.
Dissertation Committee Members: Frank LaBanca, Ed.D. and Katherine Roe, Ph.D.

Abstract
In education, therapy dogs are used in a variety of manners, such as for reading assistance programs, stress reduction visits, or welcome ambassadors after community trauma. This study was designed to explore the use of therapy dogs in educational settings through the descriptions of key stakeholders related to the experience.

Rationale

There has been an unfortunate increase in psychological disorders among students in the United States which concerns social-emotional health and the ability to learn (Crick Match, 2017; Millet, 2020).

According to the 2017 Children’s Mental Health Report, nearly one in three adolescents (31.9%) will meet the criteria for an emotional disorder (Minke, 2017; Pet Partners, 2020).

When students participate in social and emotional learning initiatives in school, these activities contribute to an overall support plan to develop coping skills (Kaufman, 2019; Kaufman & Sawin, 2018).

Exploration of various stakeholders who interact with therapy dogs will provide additional information about understanding potential connections between social-emotional skills, and coping methods with those who participate in therapy dog services (Binfet, et al., 2018).

There is still a scarcity of research that therapy dogs are beneficial for students, yet there is a lack of research in the field (Goe et al., 2017; Kasdin, 2017).

Comprehensive research is needed to investigate the use of therapy dog programs and their impact on students’ perceptions of different social-emotional learning competencies (Daly & Suess, 2010).

Significance of the Research

Kasdin (2017) supports that “qualitative research would readily allow a richer documentation of the experiences of clients across different forms of animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) and to provide a record of the extent to which interventions emerge in how the interventions are experienced” (p. 156).

There is still scarce knowledge of specifically why some AAIs are effective and others are not (Brethford, Dromleva, Gue, & Meint, 2020).

This researcher intends to further the understanding about AAIs, particularly therapy dog programs, through a theoretical lens grounded in Maslow’s new hierarchy of needs (Kaufman, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Kaufman’s Reinterpretation of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (2020)

Growth Needs
- Purpose
- Love
- Exploration

Security Needs
- Self-Esteem
- Connection
- Safety

Rationale

The researcher will seek information from Dr. Taylor Chastain, the national director of Animal-Assisted Interventions for Pet Partners.

In order to determine specific sites where therapy dogs are commonly utilized in the western U.S., the researcher will seek information from Dr. Taylor Chastain, the national director of Animal-Assisted Interventions for Pet Partners.

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Exploration of various stakeholders who interact with therapy dogs will provide additional information about understanding potential connections between social-emotional skills, and coping methods with those who participate in therapy dog services.

Comprehensive research is needed to investigate the use of therapy dog programs and their impact on students’ perceptions of different social-emotional learning competencies.

The purpose of this study is to operationalize specific individuals related to therapy dog services (Gall et al., 2007).

The study will be bound by the role of the individuals related to the therapy dog services (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Review of the Literature

Literature Focus
Attachment
Zeml, Fish, and Lauback (2017)
Kurdek (2000)

Social-Emotional Learning
Daly and Suess (2010)
Kerns, Kiehn, van Dulmen, Stuart-Parrington, and Colman (2017)
Gee, Groniger, and McCadie (2017)

Coping
Sinclair, Tylb, Prentice, McCabe, and Burke (2017)

Key Terms

- Animal-Assisted Activities (AAAs) are a category of AAI that provide benefits through more informal activities, such as stress-reduction visits or hospital visits, with the goal of enhancing quality of life. These activities are delivered by specially trained professionals and/or volunteers in partnership with a qualified and trained animal (Pet Partners, 2020).

- Coping resources are personal psychological and social resources that aid in one’s ability to manage with stressful life experiences (Garriott & Niile, 2017).

- Human-Animal Interactions (HAIs) include emotional, psychological, and physical interactions of people, animals, and the environment (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2020; Pet Partners, 2020).

- Therapy animals are trained and evaluated to safely interact with many populations in different environments with a trained and evaluated human handler. Therapy animals are most commonly dogs (Pet Partners, 2020).

Research Questions

1. How are therapy dogs services in educational settings operationalized?
2. What are the experiences of individuals who engage in therapy dog services?

Research Design

This study will use a qualitative multi-case study design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Following this description, a case will be defined as "a particular instance of the phenomenon" (p. 631).

The study will be bound by the role of the individuals related to the therapy dog services (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Setting

After contact with personnel from each therapy dog organization, the intention of the planned research will be to contact secondary school administrators (defined as grades 6-10) that utilize therapy dog programs or services throughout a tri-state area of Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York based on recommendations.

Participants

The target population includes the following groups:
(a) therapy dog representatives affiliated with specific organizations (n=18-21)
(b) therapy dog handlers affiliated with specific organizations (n=18-21)
(c) school/primary school coordinator (n=18-21)
(d) students who are current or recent participants in the service (n=18-21)

Approximately 72-84 individuals in total will be contacted, yet it is planned that 30% to 50% of those who are contacted will be available to participate in the study.

Data Collection Procedures

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews of identified stakeholders will be recorded digitally and transcribed by hard and/or software such as Nvivo or HyperResearch.

Data analysis will employ an inductive, comparative, open coding process, followed by axial coding to transform categories and themes in a constant, comparative manner (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Analysis

Field notes and artifacts will support the emergent nature of research design and investigation of the research questions.

Date | Data Collection Step
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January 2021 - May 2021 | Semi-Structured Interview Protocols
May 2021 - August 2021 | Introduction, Description of Methodology, Data Analysis
August 2021 - January 2023 | Summary of Findings, Review of Literature, Conclusions, Implications, Revisions
January 2024 - March 2022 | Revision
May 2022 | Dissertation Defense