

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



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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 distress among students in the United States which impacts social emotional health and the ability to learn (Child Mind, 2017; Minke, 2020).

According to the 2017 Children's Mental Health Report, nearly one in three adolescents (31.9%) will meet the criteria for an anxiety disorder by the age of 18 (Child Mind, 2017).

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; Folkman & Lazarus, 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.

Statement of the Problem

Research points to evidence that therapy dogs are beneficial for students, yet there is a lack of research in the field (Gee et al., 2017; Kazdin, 2017).

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).

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 & Suggs, 2010).

Significance of the Research

Kazdin (2017) supports that "qualitative research would readily allow in-depth evaluation of the experiences of clients across different forms of animal-assisted interventions (AAI) and to [provide a record of] the extent to which commonalities 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 (Brelsford, Dimolareva, Gee, & Meints, 2020).

This researcher intends to further the understanding about AAIs, specifically 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



Review of the Literature

Literature Focus	Research/Authors
Attachment	Zents, Fisk and Lauback (2017) Kurdek (2009)
Social-Emotional Learning	Daly and Suggs (2010) Kerns, Koehn, van Dulmen, Stuart-Parrigon, and Coifman (2017) Gee, Griffin, and McCradle (2017)
Coping	Signal, Taylor, Prentice, McCade, and Burke (2017)

Key Terms

- **Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA)** 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 & Nisle, 2017).
- **Human-Animal Interactions (HAI)** 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).
- Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) define a case as "a particular instance of the phenomenon" (p. 633).
- Following this description, a case will be defined as the role of 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).

Setting

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

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 6-12) that utilize therapy dog programs or services throughout a tri-state area of Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York and 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/personnel site 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



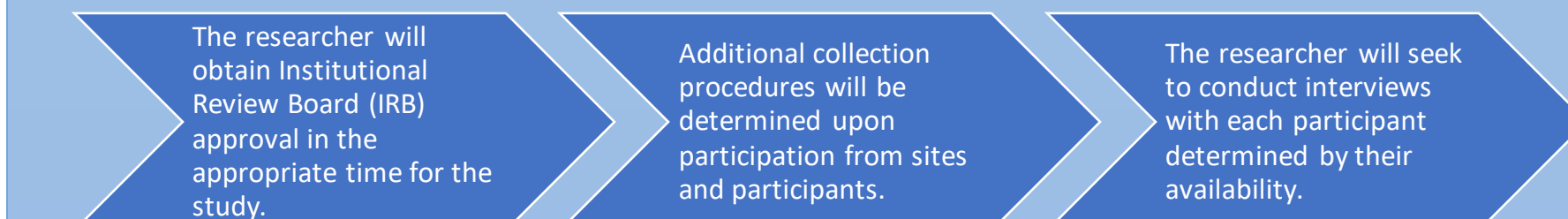
Data Analysis

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

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

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

Data Collection Procedures



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