

Opportunities and Challenges of Implementing an Animal-Assisted Therapy Program in K-12 Schools: Implications for School Counselors

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Abstract

In recent decades, the inclusion of animals in an educational context has increased in popularity. The purpose of this convergent mixed-methods study was to explore the attitudes and perceptions of school staff and faculty regarding Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) in an academic setting along with the opportunities and challenges of implementing the AAT program. Results of this study reported that school staff and faculty believe that a therapy animal could be effective in helping students succeed yet is not utilized enough in their schools as a valuable resource. The participants in this study highly encouraged the use of AAT for helping students in needs of academic, psychological, and physiological well-being. Participants also pointed out the challenges of implementing an AAT program in a school setting which include approval, fear, faculty schedules, and the animal's boundaries. Recommendations for implementing an AAT program in a school setting, related policies, and future research are discussed.

Keywords: school counselors, animal assisted therapy, mixed methods research, creative school counseling.

There is a rise in the social and emotional concerns of students following a global pandemic. To meet these concerns, schools may rely on a variety of tools, techniques, and adjuncts to school counseling such as Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT). Previous literature addresses the benefits of AAT however, there remains a need to examine perceptions about the use and implementation of a therapeutic animal program in educational settings to help meet the social-emotional needs of the students after a pandemic. Research has shown that when schools fail to provide enough social and emotional support for students, challenges arise such as skipping and dropping out of school and becoming involved in the criminal justice system (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). Therefore, it is important for schools to provide targeted social and emotional assistance to help students grow their interpersonal and self-regulation skills needed to become successful in and out of school and do so with school supports based on research surrounding AAT.

Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT)

AAT is a structured intervention regarding precise and clinically defined goals outlined in an individual's treatment plan to enhance their functioning through therapies including animals (Flynn et al., 2020). The inclusion of animals in K-12 schools has increased in popularity in recent decades (Scandura et al., 2021). Since the 1980's attention to these relationships has grown progressively as therapy animals,

particularly dogs, are utilized as counseling tools within schools, primarily by school counselors and psychologists (Herzog, 2016; Zents et al., 2017). School districts that allowed for the use of a therapeutic animal have identified many benefits including improved mental well-being of their students in addition to cultivating a positive school climate as therapy dogs have enhance relationships with peers and teachers, while helping students learn to express their feelings and enter into more trusting relationships by serving as an emotional bridge (Zents et al., 2017, Jalongo et al., 2004; Henderson & Grove, n.d.; Berry et al., 2013). In addition, therapy dogs can improve school attendance and confidence while reducing stress, decreasing learner anxiety behavior and increase educational motivation especially when faced with adversity (Henderson & Grove, n.d.; Jarolmen & Patel, 2018). AAT is an adjunct to counseling and can be utilized in an individual or group setting by the school faculty (Chandler, 2001; Flynn et al., 2020).

Although AAT in educational settings show promising results when working with students, information surrounding the implementation of such a program is limited at best. Grove et al. (2021) stated “guidelines, policies, and existing research into therapy dog programs is lacking” (p. 3) and this may be a result of concerns and challenges in doing so. Challenges and concerns consist of legal issues as well as liability, safety, allergic reactions, hygiene, and most notably safety as the most common grievance of the implementation (Grove et al., 2021). As a result, a set of guidelines and processes of implementation of an AAT program in a school is necessary. To date and the author’s knowledge, there is only one evidence-based approach to implementing a therapy dog into a school setting which was completed by Grove et al. (2021). As a result, further research is needed for the successful implementation of an AAT program in schools.

Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) in School Counseling

Within the therapeutic sessions, school counselors are teaching students about character traits such as empathy and responsibility by using therapy animals within their guidance lessons (Jenkins, 2009). In fact, the therapy animals are opening the counseling office by allowing more students to enter for the sole reason of interacting with the therapy animal as students view them as a means of unconditional acceptance within the office (Chandler, 2001). Students are using the therapy animal as an excuse to go to the counseling office yet remain there to talk to the school counselor (Chandler, 2001). When working with therapy animals, students are engaging with the animals by petting, talking, and hugging them and are provided with comfort and companionship from the animal (Jenkins, 2009). In the non-therapeutic setting, school counselors are utilizing the therapy animal to meet and greet students as they enter the school as the day begins, as well as send them off at the end of the school day and are also used in the hallways as students move from classes as well as accompany and greet students on and off the school bus (Jenkins, 2009; Jenkins et al., 2014). Additionally, school counselors are utilizing the therapy animal to teach and model age-appropriate behaviors and character traits such as integrity, kindness, respect, and responsibility within classroom settings (Jenkins, 2009). Interestingly school counselors are also using the therapy animal as class rewards and at district activities such as open houses and graduation events (Zents et al., 2017). The reasons for AAT’s efficacy in an academic counseling setting is not clearly known (Jenkins et al., 2014). As a result, school counselors currently using AAT are hoping researchers will be able to take AAT into mainstream counseling practice, noting empirical evidence can be used to determine the decision-making process (Jenkins et al., 2014).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to use both a quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interview) design to examine the knowledge and perceptions of AAT of school faculty and the process of implementing an AAT program within the school as well. The current study utilized a convergent mixed-methods design, where both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed to facilitate (a) an exploration of the attitudes and perceptions of school faculty regarding the use of AAT in schools, (b) the identification of differences in attitudes and perceptions between schools that use AAT and those that do not, along with differences in attitudes and perceptions, if any, between key school staff (school administrators, teachers and school counselors) and (c) the exploration of potential opportunities and challenges regarding the implementation of AAT in schools. Precisely, we aimed to address the following research questions:

1. What are the attitudes and perceptions of school faculty regarding the use of AAT in schools?
2. Are there differences in attitudes and perceptions between schools that use AAT and those that do not?
3. Are there differences in attitudes and perceptions between key school faculty (school administrators, teachers, and school counselors) regarding the use of AAT in schools?
4. What are the potential obstacles and opportunities regarding implementing AT in schools?

Theoretical Framework

Attachment theory characterizes the roles of development, emotional, and cognitive features of individuals in accordance with social relationships (Heotis, 2021). There is no question that individuals readily form attachments with animals as they look to them as a source of unconditional comfort (Kruger & Serpell, 2006; Fine, 2021). In addition, the Human Animal Attachment Theory believes animals bring a source of safety that can lessen distress and decrease problematic behaviors while acknowledging the importance of relationships within a child's development (O'Haire et al., 2014; Sokal, 2020). Furthermore, healthy, and secure attachment with animals may potentially provide support to individuals during uncertain times as they help individuals relax, complete a daily routine, and provide a sense of "normalcy" (Heotis, 2021; Fine 2021; Nieforth et al., 2021). The researchers selected Attachment theory as it offers a well-structured, empirically validated approach to understanding elements of human-animal interaction.

Method

We built this study upon the findings of Zents et al. (2017) which examined faculty and student perceptions regarding the effectiveness of an established school therapeutic dog in terms of aiding their student's psychological well-being and the impact they have within the school climate. They selected four rural schools in Western New York (WNY) that had a therapeutic dog in the building 40%-60% of the school days however, the small sample size of schools surveyed in this study may have limited the internal and external validity of the findings (Faber & Fonseca, 2014). As a result, the present study utilized a survey and a semi-structured interview with a broader sample of WNY school faculty who may have or may not have experience with AAT to gain an understanding of the obstacles and opportunities of an AAT program in a school setting.

Research Design

This study utilized a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design. In this research design, both the quantitative and qualitative methods are weighed equally, analyzed independently, and results are

interpreted together (Creswell & Pablo-Clark, 2011). The convergent parallel mixed-methods design was selected for this study because previous research suggests that convergent parallel mixed-methods design helps with counseling research that involves comprehensive understanding of complex issues (Rivers & Swank, 2017; Wester & McKibben, 2019). As AAT, and its opportunities and challenges in the school setting is not much discussed, it was appropriate to choose the convergent parallel mixed methods design for this research.

Participants and Data Collection Procedures

Participants for this study included school faculty in WNY school districts. Email addresses of the participants were collected from each school’s website and a total of N=63 of school districts was contacted by email, resulting in a total of N= 6,192 emails sent. Frequencies and percentages of survey participant demographics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Frequencies and Percentages for Demographic Characteristics of Sample

Variable	n (% of group)
Faculty Gender	
Female	273 (82.48)
Male	56 (16.92)
Non-Binary	1 (.3)
Prefer Not to Answer	1(.3)
Faculty Race	
White	316 (95.47)
Asian	4 (1.21)
Other	4 (1.21)
Hispanic or Latino	3 (.91)
Black or African American	2 (.6)
American Indian or Alaska Native	2(.6)
Faculty Educational Title**	
General Education Teacher	145 (44.21)
Other (Please Specify)	53 (16.16)
Special Education Teacher	33 (10.06)
School Counselor	26 (7.93)
School Social Worker	18 (5.49)
School Psychologist	12 (3.66)
Principal	8 (2.44)
Superintendent	7 (2.13)
Dean of Students	5 (1.52)
Director of Pupil/Student Personnel	5 (1.52)
School Occupational Therapist	5 (1.52)

Asst. Principal	4 (1.22)
School Speech/Language Therapist	4 (1.22)
Asst. Superintendent	3 (.91)
No Response	3
School Level Faculty Currently Working Within*	
High School	176 (38.26)
Elementary School	149 (32.39)
Middle School	135 (29.35)
Estimated % of Student Population Who Receives Special Ed. Services**	
11%-20%	120 (38.22)
21%-30%	70 (22.29)
0%-10%	56(17.83)
31%-40%	23 (7.32)
91%-100%	14 (4.46)
Don't Know	10 (3.18)
41%-50%	9 (2.87)
51%-60%	5 (1.59)
71%-80%	3 (.96)
61%-70%	2 (.64)
81%-90%	2 (.64)
No Response	17

*Some participants reported working in more than one school level, thus numerical totals exceed $n=331$

** Some participants did not report their educational title or estimated percent of student population who receive special ed. services, thus numerical totals did not meet $n=331$

A total of 331 participants responded to the survey. Majority of the respondents identified as 82.48% were Female ($n=273$), 95.47% of respondents were White ($n=316$), 44.21% ($n=145$) of the participants were General Education Teachers, 38.26% ($n=176$) worked in a high school and 38.22% ($n=120$) indicated 11%-20% receive special education services. Twelve survey participants were selected for follow-up interviews as they reported having experience implementing an AAT program in a school setting.

Of the 12 interview participants, 16.70% ($n=2$) identified as General Education Teachers, 8.33% ($n=1$) identified as a Principal, 8.33% ($n=1$) as a Director of Pupil Services, 8.33% ($n=1$) as a School Psychologist, 8.33% ($n=1$) as a Chief of Student Supports and Information, 8.33% ($n=1$) as a School Social Worker, 8.33% ($n=1$) as a School Counselor, 8.33% ($n=1$) as a Counseling Supervisor, 8.33% ($n=1$) as a Speech Language Pathologist, 8.33% ($n=1$) as a Special Education Teacher, and 8.33% ($n=1$) as an Occupational Therapist. Of the interviewed participants, 40.74% ($n=11$) worked in a high school, 33.33% ($n=9$) worked in a middle school, 25.93% ($n=7$) worked in an elementary school, all of which can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

<i>Interviewee Demographics</i>	
Variable	<i>n</i> (% of group)
Educational Title or Role	
General Education Teacher	2(16.70)
Principal	1(8.33)
Director of Pupil Services	1(8.33)
School Psychologist	1(8.33)
Chief of Student Supports and Information	1(8.33)
School Social Worker	1(8.33)
School Counselor	1(8.33)
Counseling Supervisor	1(8.33)
Speech Language Pathologist	1(8.33)
Special Ed Teacher	1(8.33)
Occupational Therapist	1(8.33)
Educational Setting Currently Working Within*	
High School	11(40.74)
Middle School	9 (33.33)
Elementary School	7 (25.93)

*n= totals more than 12 due to some participants reported working in more than one school level

Instruments

This study used a survey to collect quantitative data and an interview protocol was used to collect qualitative data using semi-structured interviews. The researchers developed a faculty survey and interview based on a study provided by Zents et al. (2017). The Zents et al. (2017) researchers developed faculty surveys based on literature reporting possible uses and benefits of a therapy animal. The researchers further developed the Zents et al. (2017) survey by adding the following questions: the participant gender and race, the school level the participant currently work at, and the estimated percent of their student population who receive special education service(s). Given the nature of the study focusing on the opportunities and challenges of an AAT program within an educational setting, the researcher also included two questions regarding the current or past use of AAT, and if so, would they be willing to sit down via a video conference call for an interview to discuss the AAT program? The researchers surveyed if the participants knew of faculty who brought an animal in the classroom and how many classrooms utilize AAT. Finally, the researcher surveyed which species of animals and grade levels are being used for AAT, as well as if the participants currently own or have owned a pet. The participants were not asked their name, age, and/or school district they are currently employed in, to ensure confidentiality.

Interview protocol for the qualitative data collection were related to notable situations in which an animal was found to be beneficial (i.e., individual and/or group setting), the rationale of using AAT, and any perceived opportunities or challenges of utilizing a therapy dog in the school system. The researchers also asked how the faculty responded to the AAT, how AAT helped in their everyday practice, and the

success rates of students who work with the AAT. Finally, the researchers asked follow-up questions and asked for clarification when applicable.

A list of interview questions is provided below:

What do you perceive as obstacles and opportunities in terms of placing AAT within your educational setting?

What was the rationale for bringing AAT into your educational setting?

In what context or educational area is AAT used?

How has AAT helped in your everyday practice?

What is the success rate of the students who work with AAT?

How has the staff and faculty responded to AAT?

What social-emotional resources have been newly implemented within your educational building once the Covid-19 pandemic began?

Is there anything we have not spoken about that you feel is important for me to know?

Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis was performed using the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 26. Initial descriptive statistical analyses were conducted to determine the means and frequency distributions of school administrators, teachers and therapeutic staff attitudes and perceptions regarding the use of AAT in schools. The researchers used t-test to compare the belief of AAT's effectiveness among school administrators, teachers and therapeutic staff members that do and do not utilize AAT. In a follow up t-test participants were grouped based on teaching and non-teaching status on beliefs of effectiveness of AAT in schools.

For the qualitative data researchers used standard qualitative methods that included a semi-structured interview, transcription of participant responses, and categorization of suggestive themes from participants regarding the opportunities and challenges of animal-assisted therapy in an educational setting. Each interview was recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim, then responses were examined to identify recurring ideas and emerging themes using thematic analysis, about the use of AAT in schools as summarized in Figure 1

Credibility and Trustworthiness

The qualitative analysis team for this study consisted of two assistant professors in a CACREP-accredited counselor education program. To ensure and enhance trustworthiness, the researchers discussed and reflected on a regular basis during the process of data collection and data analysis of the qualitative data. The first author, who has 5 years of school counseling experience, used thematic coding to identify texts that were linked by a common theme to come up with categories. The second author, who has training in qualitative research methodology, and a school counselor educator, audited the qualitative data collection and data analysis. Expert opinion was sought as a part of consultation with a senior qualitative researcher, to ensure credibility. Both the researchers met on a weekly basis, during the data analysis process, and practiced reflexivity by jotting down researcher's thoughts about the process. A step-by-step approach was taken to ensure trustworthiness. First and foremost, reflective journaling was practiced by the authors, which included documentation about the subjective feelings during data collection and data analysis. Secondly the second author, in consultation with an external expert audited the data analysis

process, along with the generated categories and themes. And finally, the quantitative and qualitative data were integrated for interpretation.

Results

The present study explored the obstacles and opportunities associated with implementing an AAT program within an educational setting through a mixed method approach consisting of a survey and semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a small subgroup as an exploratory portion to this analysis.

Quantitative Results

Initial descriptive statistical analyses were conducted to determine the means and frequency distributions of survey participants' attitudes and perceptions regarding the use of AAT in schools is presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Participants Responses to Survey Items Regarding the Use of AAT in Schools

Frequencies, Percentages, and Mean Item Responses

Item	n (% of Group)	Mean (SD)	Survey
1. How frequent do you see the therapy animal in your school?		4.82 (1.63)	
I Have Never Seen the Therapeutic***			
Animal in our School	146 (52.14)		
<1 Time a Month	60 (21.43)		
2-3 Times a Week	30 (10.71)		
Daily	24 (8.57)		
1 Time a Week	10 (3.57)		
2-3 Times a Month	10 (3.57)		
No Response	51		
2. How effective you believe a therapy animal is in helping students succeed in school? ***		4.21 (.87)	
Very Effective	129 (45.58)		
Somewhat Effective	95 (33.57)		
Neutral	51 (18.02)		
Somewhat Ineffective	5 (1.77)		
Not at all Effective	3 (1.06)		
No Response	48		

3. How many students this year have been referred to work with the therapy animal at your institution? *** 3.83 (2.40)
- | | |
|-------------|-------------|
| Do Not Know | 138 (50.74) |
| None | 109 (40.07) |
| >6 | 17 (6.25) |
| 1-2 | 5 (1.84) |
| 5-6 | 2 (.74) |
| 3-4 | 1 (.37) |
| No Response | 59 |
4. In what capacity that a student has been recommended to work with the therapy animal for? Please check all that apply. **
- | | |
|------------------------------|-------------|
| Do Not Know | 177 (42.86) |
| Anxiety | 39 (9.44) |
| Reward for Positive Behavior | 36 (8.72) |
| Depression | 30 (7.26) |
| Low Self-Esteem | 26 (6.30) |
| Other | 26 (6.30) |
| Social Skills Training | 24 (5.81) |
| Individual Counseling | 22 (5.33) |
| Group Counseling | 16 (3.87) |
| Reading Interventions | 16 (3.87) |
| Math Interventions | 1 (.24) |
5. Does any of your schools currently offer or have offered Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) in the past* ***
- | | |
|-------------|-------------|
| No | 192 (62.75) |
| Yes | 62 (20.26) |
| Do Not Know | 52 (16.99) |
| No Response | 25 |
6. Do you know of faculty who brought an animal in the classroom* *** 3.75 (1.46)
- | | |
|----------------|-------------|
| Definitely Yes | 144 (48.32) |
| Do Not Know | 45 (15.10) |
| Probably Yes | 42 (14.09) |
| Definitely Not | 40 (13.42) |
| Probably Not | 27 (9.06) |
| No Response | 33 |
7. In your estimation, how many classrooms utilize AAT? Please indicate 'do not know' if information is not known* *** 3.46 (2.28)
- | | |
|-------------|------------|
| Do Not Know | 106(40.30) |
|-------------|------------|

None	94 (35.74)
1-2	38 (14.44)
>6	13 (.05)
3-4	8 (.03)
5-6	4 (.01)
No Response	68

8. What species of animals are being used for AAT at your institution? Please check all that apply* ***

Dog	119 (36.96)
Do Not Know	99 (30.74)
Other	46 (14.29)
Guinea Pig	23 (7.14)
Hamster	16 (4.97)
Rabbit	13 (4.04)
Bird	2 (.62)
Cat	2 (.62)
Horse	1 (.31)
Pig	1 (.31)

9. Which grade levels are utilizing AAT at your institution? Please check all that apply* **

Do Not Know	141 (42.47)
Elementary School	67 (20.18)
Middle School	67 (20.18)
High School	57 (17.17)

10. Have you ever owned or currently own a pet* **

Yes	272 (95.77)
No	12 (4.23)
No Response	47

*= Newly added item

**= Some participants reported multiple responses for the survey items in what capacity that a student has been recommended to work with the therapy animal for and which grade levels are utilizing AAT, thus numerical totals exceed $n=331$

***= Some participants did not report how frequently they see the therapy animal in their school, how effective they believe a therapy animal is in helping students succeed in school, how many students this year have been referred to work with the therapy animal at their school, if any of their schools currently offer or have offered AAT in the past, if they know of faculty who brought an animal in the classroom, their estimation regarding how many classrooms utilize AAT, what species of animals are being used for AAT at their school, and if they ever owned or currently own a pet, thus numerical totals did not meet $n=331$

The survey participants reported that most (52%) have never seen a therapeutic animal in their school, believe a therapy animal is very effective (46%) in helping students succeed in school, yet (51%) do not know how many students have been referred to work with the therapy animal at their school and in what capacity (43%). Additionally, 63% of participants reported their school does not currently offer or has offered AAT in the past, definitely (48%) know of a faculty member who has brought an animal into the classroom, did not know (40%) if any classrooms utilize AAT, while dogs (37%) were the most common animal being used for AAT at the school, participants reported they did not know (43%) which grade levels are utilizing AAT, and reported that they have owned or currently own a pet (96%).

In order to examine the differences between schools that do ($n=62$) and do not utilize AAT ($n=192$), an independent samples t-test and effect size were conducted.

Table 4

School Administration, Teachers, and Therapeutic Staff Members of Schools That Do and

Do Not Utilize AAT Belief of AAT's Effectiveness

Schools that Utilize AAT		Schools that Do Not Utilize AAT		$t(231)$	p	Cohens d
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
4.42	.79	4.19	.83	1.85	.06	.82

This test was found to not be statistically significant, $t(231) = 1.85, p=.06; d=.82$. The effect size for this analysis ($d = .82$) was found in the range Cohen's (1988) convention for a large effect ($d = .8$). These results indicate that there is not sufficient evidence that schools that utilize AAT ($M=4.42, SD=.79$) believe AAT is more effective in helping students succeed than those who do not offer AAT ($M=4.19, SD=.83$). Table 4 displays the school administration, teachers, and therapeutic staff members of schools that do and do not utilize AAT belief on AAT's effectiveness.

To examine if there were differences in attitudes and perceptions between teaching and non-teaching faculty, an independent samples t-test and effect size was conducted.

Table 5

Non-Teaching Faculty and Teaching Faculty Beliefs of Effectiveness of AAT in Schools

Non-Teaching		Teaching Faculty		$t(272)$	p	Cohens d
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
4.17	.88	4.12	.85	-.466	.64	.86

This test was found to not be statistically significant, $t(272) = -.466, p=.64; d=.86$. The effect size for this analysis ($d = .86$) was found in the range Cohen's (1988) convention for a large effect ($d = .8$). These results indicate that there is no sufficient evidence that non-teaching faculty ($M=4.17, SD=.88$) believe AAT is more effective in helping students succeed than teaching faculty ($M=4.12, SD=.85$).

Qualitative Results

Semi-structured interviews were analyzed, and the responses were recorded to identify patterns of AAT program implementation which resulted in three themes emerging. Overall, three (3) key themes emerged that increased the understanding of the obstacles and opportunities of an AAT program in an

educational setting: 1. hindrance, 2. credentials, and 3. reassurance of efficacy which can be found in Figure 1.

Hindrance	Credentials	Reassurance of Efficacy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obstacles • Administrative Support • Anxiety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Testing • Certified • Insured • Involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities • Emotional Response • Academic • Passion • Benefit • Social-Emotional • Positive • Demeanor • Very little additional support

Note. Thematic map with the different themes and categories identified.

Figure 1. *Thematic Map*

Theme-1 Hindrance

Although interview participants reported the positive prospects of AAT in a school setting, there were also hindrances that were identified as well. Participants reported several obstacles to providing AAT in a school setting, notable fear and allergies causing initial obstacles. One participant reported “first obstacle that comes to mind is the students fear of dogs specifically.” In addition, an interview participant noted the obstacle, “the first one obstacle is anyone who says they have an allergy.” Another hindrance to having an AAT program in a school setting is administrative support. Participants reported that a meeting between them, school administration, and the board of education was necessary before the therapy animal could be brought into the building. One interview participant simply stated, “our district does not support this initiative!” Another interviewee reported “I started with my building administration who was a big proponent of animal-assisted therapy. He then had a conversation with our superintendent, seeing if it was something that the board of education would possibly entertain...I put a presentation to the board giving them information, the pros, the cons, the training, what the whole process would be in trying to implement an actual policy here in the district. “Finally, interview participants reported that AAT programs in a school setting is anxiety provoking. This anxiety stems from many individuals including parents/guardians of the students. One interview participant stated, “parents did not want their kids to interact with the therapy animal,” while another explained “...our principal wants all the parents to basically sign off as a permission slip knowing the therapy animal is in the building.”

Theme 2-Credentials

Participants reported that the therapy animal needs to be properly tested, certified, and insured before they can be brought into the school. The testing begins with basic obedience courses which allows for the therapy animal to be certified. One interviewee reported “getting the therapy animal trained, going through all the therapy animals’ obedience classes, all the Canine Good Citizen, all those background training, and then the therapy animals’ certification. “Participants also reported the handler of the therapy animal needs to have adequate insurance for the therapy animal. This insurance can come from the school or the handler’s homeowner policy. One interviewee reported “some schools have the therapy animal covered under an umbrella policy...however, I was encouraged to still look under my own homeowner’s policy to see what was available.” Finally, it is important to note that everyone is involved in establishing an AAT program as an interviewee stated, “make sure board policies are up to date. Make sure your board is involved. Make sure that your legal team is involved. And make sure that your unions are involved as well.”

Theme 3-Reassurance of Efficacy

Interview participants reported on the opportunities, emotional response, academic, passion, benefits, social-emotional, positive, demeanor, very little, and additional supports as patterns in the theme of reassurance of efficacy. The opportunities of having an AAT program in the school was reported by several participants. One participant stated, “the therapy animal is magic when he is here... the therapy animal is utilized in so many ways, that I am blown away.” Participants also mentioned the emotional and social response a therapy animal has on students. One participant reported, “it’s amazing how quickly the therapy animal changes the student’s mood, their affect, how they are processing their situation, it’s incredible.” In addition, the academic benefit of having the therapy animal was also a pattern surrounding the interview participants. Participants mentioned that therapy animals help reduce anxiety especially during test taking. One participant reported, “...utilizing therapy animals for exams because it is proven that when students have a reduction in anxiety for test taking, they do better on tests.” The pattern of passion was recognized as interviewees reported their goals and dreams of having a therapy animal with them as a school professional. One interview participant mentioned their passion stemming from their graduate school experience and love for dogs by stating “... AAT was goal of mine from grad school...a professor brought in her therapy dog to one of our grad school classes.... and just seeing kind of how the students reacted with a little therapy animal walking around...I thought this is so cool.... I knew I wanted to work with kids... from there the professor was kind of my inspiration between wanting a dog to come to work with me and I’ve always kind of been a dog person... knowing how dogs improve everything.” The passion for AAT was also echoed by an interview participant by stating “...from my initial interview with this school, I said AAT is my goal, I have the dog, she is in training right now. Basically, if you guys are gonna say no, I’m not accepting the job here.”

The next pattern derived from the interviews was the understanding of how AAT can benefit individuals. Several interview participants went on to mention the benefits AAT has for students, but it was also interesting that an interview participant reported how the therapy animal had a positive effect for the adults as well noting “our staff has been wonderful... I sent out an email to all staff... here’s who you are going to be seeing the therapy animal, here’s what the therapy animal is doing, information about the therapy animal, please respond to me if we can visit your classroom... I received 12 emails back from

teachers...the teachers stated here are my study halls, feel free to bring the therapy animal in, if you need to interrupt my class go ahead... how do the teachers book a session with the therapy animal?

Participants also reported how the students would change their demeanor when they saw the therapy animal. Participants mentioned how the therapy animal was used as a greeting when students arrived at the school to start their day off on the right note but also during the day when the students needed getting their behavior back on track. One interviewee stated “we had a little girl havin‘a meltdown in the hallway and no one could get through to her. And they walked by with the therapy animal, and she completely changed her mood and understanding.”

The final pattern resulting from the interviews was the addition of social-emotional support because of the Covid-19 pandemic. There were mixed responses from participants as several stated there was no new social emotional support created while others say there were several. One interview participant reported, “...other than the fact that we’ve been encouraged to check in with the kids... but other than that, it’s just school like normal now.” On the other hand, a participant reported “oh lots... we have started a social-emotional learning coach for our teachers, and we have now hired a full-time behavior specialist.” Overall interview participants reported that AAT will be met with hinderance within a school. However, through education, credentials, and proven effectiveness, AAT may be effectively utilized within a school.

Discussion

The current study sought to close the gap in the literature by examining the differences between the attitudes and perceptions of school staff and faculty regarding AAT in schools utilizing a sample from across Western New York (WNY) and how to implement an AAT program in their school if desired. Using a convergent mixed methods approach the current research revealed that while there are certainly challenges in implementing an AAT program in schools, there are numerous opportunities that are revealed along with the steps of implementing the AAT program in a school.

Research Participant’s reflection on AAT Program Implementation

The survey and semi-structured interviews allowed for participants to discuss the opportunities and challenges as well as their experiences implementing an AAT program into their school. Several participants noted the opportunities and benefits as one said “the dog brings comfort and joy to all who see her and get to pet her. She is a source of ongoing peace and normalcy in troubling times” while another celebrated the idea by stating: “highly recommend the use of therapy animals. The building is a much calmer place,when there is a dog here :-) Helpful to not only students, but also staff and administration. Has also been beneficial to parents during some difficult P/T conferences.” Another participant expressed the opportunities of a therapy animal in a school by saying “the therapy animals within our district have been a highly valuable and effective means to reduce anxiety, increase happiness and create a positive and safe learning environment.” Participants also mentioned the challenges with having animal therapy in the school such as fear of the animal as well as allergies and anxiety that can be brought about from it and gaining approval of the program from the district. Several participants noted these challenges in the survey and interviews by mentioning: “I would love to see this at the high school and elementary in some way. At current, our principal has a fear of dogs so it could be baby steps.” Another participant in the study said “I am against using therapy animals in school. There are enough distractions as it is, and a "therapy" animal will only add to it. Actually, I am not a fan of therapy animals anywhere - stores, buses, restaurants,

airports, bowling alleys, etc. The day we start allowing students to bring animals into the schools as "therapy" is the day I put in for retirement.”

Based on the survey and semi-structured interviews, participants had several considerations for implementing a therapy animal program into their school. To begin, there needed to be a dedicated individual in the school willing to take on the role of handler, training, and certification of the therapy animal (in this case a dog). The handler then had to present the idea of the program to their direct supervisor (i.e., a principal) and if they were in favor of it, the handler then had to speak to the superintendent to gauge their willingness to have a therapy dog in the school. If the superintendent also approved of the program, the handler then had to present it to the board of education. During the presentation, school staff, faculty, administration, community members, and the board were able to ask questions and state their concerns about the therapy animal. Individuals were most interested in understanding the credentials of the handler and animal, what obstructions may come about because of the program and allow for the handler to provide evidence surrounding existing therapy animal programs in school settings.

Recommendations for Implementing an AAT Program in a School Setting

The steps to implement an AAT program in a school setting were reported from a survey and semi-structured interview. These steps include training an animal and presenting the AAT program to the school. It should be noted that implementing an AAT program into a school may be a long and challenging process. Research participants described their dedication to this as “goals” and “dreams” of theirs but also noted the training process can be difficult to begin. It is also worth mentioning everyone interviewed regarding the implementation of an AAT program into a school utilized a dog as the therapy animal.

Training

Training consists of not only preparing the therapy animal for service, but also the handler. Successful therapy animal handlers need working and access to continuing education opportunities surrounding best practice of working with a therapy animal (Pet Partners. (n.d.). Best practice begins with the handler effectively communicating with the school community about education, training, roles and responsibilities, therapy animal program goals and measurement, and the safety of all involved (Grove et al., 2021). To ensure safety, the handler must have a set of policies and procedures readily available that provide answers to issues that come about (Pet Partners. (n.d.). The basic training of the therapy animal should begin at a young age. An interview participant noted they began training their puppy as soon as they could, starting with basic obedience training which can last six weeks. The therapy animal must then be certified through a therapy animal organization, for example, the Good Canine Citizen Test organized by the American Kennel Club. Certification through the Canine Good Citizen Test means the dog can pass a test of ten skills. These skills consist of the dog accepting a friendly stranger, sitting politely for petting, appearance, and grooming, out for a walk, walking through a crowd, sit and down on cue/staying in place, coming when called, reaction to another dog, reaction to distractions, and supervised separation (American Kennel Club, n.d.). Participants also noted their therapy dog was certified through the American Working Dog Association. After the animal is properly trained and certified, the handler must present the idea to the school

Presentation

Participants indicate that presenting the idea over several meetings is an essential component to implementing an AAT program within a school. In fact, one participant mentioned the program in their interview for their job. Nonetheless, the process should begin with the individual talking to their direct administrator, for example, the building principal. One participant stated their building principal had them begin the process by writing them a letter of intent for the therapy animal. Several participants noted that having a principal who is supportive of having a therapy animal in the school is very beneficial for its implementation. The principal, if agreed upon the idea, will then bring the program to the superintendent to see if the board of education would be open to the idea. If they believe the board would be interested, the individual must present the program at a board of education meeting. The board of education meeting consists of a research PowerPoint presentation explaining the pros and cons of having a therapy animal in the school and how the program would be implemented. Several participants mentioned they brought the therapy animal to the building for all to meet and establish their correct behavior. For example, a participant had the dog sit patiently during the meeting and when called upon, greeted those who desired. However, the administration and board of education cannot give the therapy program approval until they speak with the schools' legal advisors to discuss liability, especially insurance. It is very important that not only legal but ethical and risk implications are assessed while designing and implementing an AAT program into a school. The well-being of all (faculty, staff, students, and the therapy animal) is of utmost importance. As previously mentioned, the therapy animal is a faculty member, and their welfare needs to be continually assessed regarding the type and the length of contact with students. Participants also noted their schedules as the therapy dog needs to be fed, removed from the building to relieve itself, and a quiet place to rest when not working. A few participants noted that their therapy animal was covered by the school's liability insurance while others noted they had to obtain insurance through their homeowner's policy. It is important to mention that certain schools had their students return a parent permission slip to be able to work with the animal or not.

Implications for School Counselors

School counselors are trained professionals to understand the holistic needs of their students. Part of these needs consist of social-emotional support. One role of a school counselor is to develop and promote the social-emotional needs of their students through a comprehensive school counseling program. The result of the present study supports that a comprehensive school counseling program may be further enhanced with the addition of a therapeutic animal, notably a therapy dog. Therapy dogs may assist with the school counseling program in several therapeutic settings such as individual and/or group counseling sessions or within the classroom through academic interventions. Within these settings, therapy dogs can facilitate the development of rapport and trust within the counseling process as they enhance the therapeutic relationship by providing a non-judgmental means of support.

According to the results of this study having a therapy animal allows students more capability to speak about their thoughts, emotions, and feelings and builds trust between the student and counselor. In doing so, the students can speak freely and are encouraged to be transparent and authentic by breaking down the communication barrier. Students are then presented with opportunities to build their confidence, self-esteem, self-worth, assertiveness, and independence. The school counselor may also utilize the therapy animal to help students who are struggling with transition or behavioral issues, to provide support, acceptance, and a connection to the school and other students through a calming demeanor. Additionally,

the therapy animal also can bring more students to the counseling center who would otherwise not enter by reducing the stigma of counseling and mental health overall which can diversify the population served.

Implications for School Counselor Education and Training

Although widely applicable across mental health settings, animal-assisted therapy within an educational setting is a new therapeutic approach. And as research surrounding animal-assisted therapy supports physiological and psychological benefits, overall empirical research surrounding animal-assisted therapy presents problems related to generalizability. As a result, it is recommended that counselor educators may begin educating future counselors regarding anthrozoology and the human-animal bond and human-animal interaction. The emphasis should be directed towards animals as living beings, the cultural differences surrounding humans and animals, the relationship between humans and animals in a working and companion relationship, and the policies implemented to ensure the ethical treatment and welfare of animals (and humans) through their interactions. Moving forward, when discussing animal-assisted interventions used within animal-assisted therapy, the educators should focus on common treatment goals such as improving socialization and communication, reducing stress and anxiety, and improving mood while lessening depression when educating students regarding the benefits of animal-assisted therapy in a school setting. In doing such, counselor educators should focus on common mental health treatment interventions such as training the therapy animal a new command, engaging in respectful play, practicing care for the animal, and observing and discussing the animal's response to human behavior.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study has several limitations which should be noted. The primary limitation is the size of the sample and generalizability. Another limitation of the present study is survey research relies on self-selection as participants had the ability to either participate in the study or not. The sampling strategy of the study was also a limitation. The sampling strategy was partial to recruitment via email and the use of the internet and had limited follow-up emails to remind participants to complete the survey. Further research is recommended to be conducted on the species of therapy animal used, which type of school (i.e., public, or private) utilize AAT and the resources made available for it. Future research can also be conducted on the evaluation of an AAT program in school. Finally, this study revealed when AAT is available, 40.07% of the time students have not been referred to work with the therapy animal, indicating a lack of use of the additional resource. Future research could examine why, when AAT is available, it is not being utilized and interventions of making AAT more accessible to students in the school. This may be studied in a case-study approach. Researchers can utilize real-life scenarios of schools not using AAT when it is available, provide a detailed description of why AAT is not being used, and provide applications in terms of utilizing AAT in a more resourceful manner.

Conclusion

The present study examined school staff and faculty on their perceptions of AAT in school settings and the opportunities and challenges of implementing AAT in schools using a convergent mixed methods study. Promising findings of the study indicate school administration, teachers, and therapeutic staff reported that they believe a therapy animal is very effective in helping students succeed however, do not feel AAT is utilized enough in their schools as a valuable resource. The study also found there is no

significant difference in beliefs that AAT will help students succeed between schools that offer AAT and those that do not. However, it should be noted that the number of schools that do not currently offer or have offered in the past was significantly higher than schools that currently offer or have offered AAT in the past. Furthermore, it was also revealed there is no significant difference in beliefs that AAT will help students succeed between teaching and non-teaching faculty. Finally, the study revealed obstacles and opportunities of implementing an AAT program in a school setting. The obstacles consisted of approval, fear, faculty schedules, and the animal's boundaries. The opportunities identified were in areas of academic, psychological, and physiological importance. Additionally, to implement an AAT program in a school, the school must have dedicated individuals who will research AAT programs in schools, train and certify a therapy animal, and meet with and present the program to school officials for its' policies and implementation into the school. This research suggests therapy animals can be well received in a school setting by students and faculty and considerably help students succeed. Because this is a relatively new program in school settings, there remains a need to further research the perceptions of AAT in schools, and how effective it is in helping students succeed.

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