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# The effect of therapy dogs on children in a learning environment

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**THE EFFECT OF THERAPY DOGS ON CHILDREN IN A LEARNING  
ENVIRONMENT**

by

Kimberly Ann Sheckler

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Psychology  
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Master of Arts in School Psychology  
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Thesis Chair: Roberta, Dihoff, Ph.D.

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## **Dedications**

I dedicate my manuscript to my loving family, friends, and Landmark Americana for providing me with never ending support and motivation during this journey.

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## **Abstract**

Kimberly A. Sheckler

### **THE EFFECT OF THERAPY DOGS ON CHILDREN IN A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

2016-2017

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Master of Arts in School Psychology

Having a dog in school can seem exciting for many students, but can these furry companions actually help students attain higher levels of academic success? The benefits of therapy dogs in an educational setting can be seen in many research studies. Dogs in the classroom can be used to calm fears, relieve anxiety, and teach skills to students (Lessons Learned from Dogs in the Classroom, 1996). Even though there is much evidence of the positive benefits of therapy dogs in a school, many schools still choose not to have therapy dog programs. This thesis looks at the benefits of therapy dogs as well as the risks of having them in a school. I created a short survey that could be answered by whoever has the most involvement with the dog therapy program in school, which can help provide answers to the positives and negatives of the dogs. Preliminary data from the ten different school districts surveyed will be discussed. My thesis will help provide evidence if the dogs actually do help students achieve better academically and assess the risks of having a dog in a school can bring.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Need for Study**

The need for this study was to investigate if therapy dogs are beneficial in a learning environment. There is much literature on the benefits of therapy dogs but not many schools utilize a therapy dog program.

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore whether specially trained dogs impact the learning environment in a positive way. Specific aims of this study were to compare student performance on academic tasks that utilize therapy dogs as opposed to those who do not.

#### **Hypothesis**

It was hypothesized that a brief interaction with a therapy dog i.e., petting, would facilitate lower stress levels allowing for students to perform better on academic tasks. Since it is believed that therapy dogs lower stress levels in children in the classroom, it was concluded that schools that utilize the program benefit from higher levels of academic success for their students. It is also hypothesized that positive attitude toward the use of therapy dogs would result in increased academic achievement among all students.

#### **Operational Definitions**

Therapy Dog- A dog trained to provide affection and comfort to people in hospitals, retirement homes, nursing homes, schools, people with learning difficulties, and stressful situations, such as disaster areas.

## **Assumptions**

The use of therapy dogs will lower stress levels in students and allow for better academic performance.

## **Limitations**

There were some limitations in this study. The sample size was only ten schools, which is a rather small sample size. A larger sample size would provide more accurate data.

## **Summary**

A dog in a school is something that people can have very different reactions to. There are those that are all for having a dog in a school, while others are concerned about allergies or possible dog attacks. There is much positive research on the benefit of therapy dogs in an education setting and yet, “the majority of elementary, middle and high schools have yet to fully tap into this tremendous tool that can greatly serve its students.” (Charlotte’s Litter, 2014, para. 4). The purpose of this study is to investigate the prevalence of therapy dogs in educational settings and their effects on learning.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Therapy Dogs**

A dog in a school? “Therapy animals serve as non-judgmental companions in the process of learning and development. They are used for everything from helping with lessons to teaching social skills and responsibility. They help students with emotional problems that interfere with school, including grief and personal crisis” (Christensen, 2017, para. 10). The benefits of therapy dogs go far beyond just a school setting. Therapy dogs are defined as, “dogs who go with their owners to volunteer in settings such as schools, hospitals, and nursing homes” (“American Kennel Club,” 2017, para. 3) furthermore, it is “the goal of the dog and owner to work together as a team to improve the lives of other people” (“American Kennel Club,” 2017, para.3).

It is important to know that there is a difference between therapy dogs and service dogs. “Service Dogs are individually trained to perform tasks and do work that mitigate their handlers’ disabilities” whereas the tasks of a therapy dog are to, “provide psychological or physiological therapy to individuals other than their handlers” (“Please Don’t Pet Me,” 2016, para. 6). A lot of service dogs also double as therapy dogs. There are also many dogs that serve as a third type of working dog, called an emotional support animal. They do not have to have any type of personalized training and their purpose is to help their owner with emotional comfort (“Please Don’t Pet Me,”2016).

## **Therapy Dog Benefits**

Therapy dogs have a long list of benefits for the people they help on mental, social, emotional, and physical levels. Just to list a few, for physical health the dogs, “lower blood pressure, improve cardiovascular health, release endorphins (oxytocin) that have a calming effect, and diminishes overall physical pain” (“Paws for People,” 2005, para. 2). For mental health, they, “lessen depression, decrease feelings of isolation, encourage communication, provide comfort, decrease anxiety, and increase socialization.” (“Paws for People,” 2005, para. 3). Furthermore, the dogs can also be very helpful with literacy support for children. The canines do this by providing a non-stressful, non-judgmental environment which helps increase self-confidence allowing for the children to focus better and improve literacy skills (“Paws for People,” 2005).

**Therapy dogs and stress reduction.** Multiple studies have shown that interactions with therapy dogs reduce stress levels. According to the article, “Dogs Help Humans Reduce Stress” (2001), “playing with or petting an animal can increase levels of the stress-reducing hormone oxytocin and decrease production of the stress hormone cortisol. These hormonal changes can help a nervous child feel more relaxed about reading out loud” (para. 2). In fact, dogs help with stress reduction so much that they are often brought into chemotherapy sessions in order to lower a patient’s blood pressure to a level that is acceptable for treatment. Also, in a 2001 study “researchers found that pet owning patients with high blood pressure could keep their blood pressure low during times of mental stress than patients without stress” (“Dogs Help Humans Reduce Stress,” 2001, para. 2). Dogs also provide sensory stress relief. “Touch and movement are two

healthy ways to quickly manage stress. Stroking a dog lowers blood pressure and can help you quickly feel calmer and less stressed” (Robinson & Segal, 2017, para. 12).

Finals week for many college students is a time of immense stress. This is a time where students are faced with a lot of work and studying, most often leading to a break down in the immune system where students often get sick (“Puppy Rooms to help stressed- out college students,” 2017). Therapy dogs are so successful in stress reduction that they are brought on too many college campuses. According to the article “Puppy Rooms: to help stressed-out college students” (2017):

Universities in the U.S. and Canada have started bringing in therapy dogs to help their students cope with the intense stresses of college life. Studies have shown that pets can alleviate depression, reduce anxiety, and decrease levels of the stress hormone, cortisol, and provide some real benefits for university students (Dogtime Staff, para. 1).

In addition to the college support of using dogs as stress relief, Harvard medical school uses a four-year-old Shih- Tzu named Cooper who is a registered therapy dog in their library on Tuesday’s and Thursday’s. Harvard employee’s and students are allowed to be with Cooper up to thirty minutes at a time, he can be checked out similar to a library book but he stays in a safe space the whole time (Junge & MacDonald, 2011). Librarian Wendy Brown stated, “Just this morning, we had someone come by and say, ‘I don’t know what it is, but he just makes me happy” (Junge & MacDonald, 2011, para. 6).

The Harvard website also includes the various health benefits that dogs can have for people. These health benefits include, “lower blood pressure, improve recovery from

heart disease, and even reduce rates of asthma and allergy in children who grow up with a Fido or a Frisky in the house. Pets also improve people's psychological well-being and self-esteem" (Junge & MacDonald, 2011, para. 5). In the library of the school, Cooper has a special official entry log in which he is categorized as an antidepressive/ anti-anxiety agent and animal assisted therapy. The website also noted that it was actually Yale Law school that came up with the idea of a library- based therapy dog. It was from this idea that inspired Harvard medical school to get Cooper for their library for students who need to blow off steam and destress (Junge & MacDonald, 2011).

**Healing effects of therapy dogs.** According to Christensen (2017) in the article "Therapy Dogs, Service Dogs, and Emotional Support Dogs", the healing effects of therapy dogs are explained. Stress is unavoidable in life and this makes learning how to manage it so important. It has been found that as humans spend time with animals such as therapy dogs, the negative effects of stress are reversed (Christensen, 2017). A visit from a therapy animal increases mental stimulation and can give a patient increased self-esteem and acceptance. In a school setting this can help a child to become more involved in group activities, which means an increase in socialization. Aside from reducing the hormone cortisol that is produced during times of stress the dogs can increase hormones that are associated with feelings of well- being which include, beta-endorphin, beta-phenylethylamine, dopamine, oxytocin, prolactin and serotonin (Christensen, 2017). Additionally, for those who are on medication for things such as anxiety or depression a therapy dog can be so beneficial that the need for medication becomes less (Christensen, 2017).



## **Benefits in An Educational Setting**

The benefits of therapy dogs in an educational setting seem to be endless. “Dogs in the classroom can be used to calm fears, relieve anxiety, and teach skills” (“Lessons Learned from Dogs in the Classroom,” 1996, para. 1). Reducing stress is so important to help the learning process, as well as to protect the overall health of the student. Sometimes all a stressed student needs is the head of a dog on their lap or a simple pet to make them feel better about their stressful situation and to think for clearly.

Another important element that therapy dogs have aside from their educational benefits, is their ability to help students with social troubles. According to the article “Lessons Learned from Dogs in the Classroom” (1996) states:

Nancy Starewicz, a former school psychologist, has devised a program in which she uses her 3-year-old soft-coated Wheaten terrier, Lucky, to motivate children to behave well...Lucky doesn't care what you're wearing or what kind of house you live in, Starewicz tells students when teaching the Judge less, accept more lesson. Her discussions with students show that they get the message, she said (para. 6).

All too often students, especially those that are older are subject to ridicule or judgement in school, but the therapy dog can be the comfortable situation that many students turn to when the need an open-minded friend.

Another example of this is seen in the “Tutors with a Tail” program, here students read to a therapy dog and instantly feel calmer since they know they are not being judged as they would be if they were reading to another human. The program has been so

successful that, in a study with 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students reading levels increased 38 words per minute when reading to a certified therapy dog. This is compared to an average of 27 words per minute when the student read either independently or with a tutor (“Therapy Dogs United,” 2016).

**Benefits to school staff.** When using a therapy dog program in a school many are focusing on the benefit to just the students. Another factor to consider is that the staff is also exposed to the therapy dog and can also benefit from having the dog in school. The teachers can benefit second hand from the effects of the therapy dogs by the success of the program with their students. As mentioned before, dogs in the classroom can be used for a variety of reasons including; to calm fears, relieve anxiety, and teach skills” (“Charlette’s Litter,”2014,). With a calmer classroom environment, this can make it easier for teachers to teach their lessons and help students. As a result, this can create less anxiety and stress for the teachers and allow for smoother lessons and more effective learning.

The therapy dog Cooper used at the Harvard medical school library, “is on duty at Countway to help students, staff, and faculty members who need a little mid-day stress relief” (Junge/MacDonald, 2011, para. 7). Notice how Cooper is not only available for use by the student, but is just as available to staff and faculty members as well. The article also goes on to say, “Harvard employees can spend up to 30 minutes at a time with Cooper by showing their ID at the reference desk” (Junge/MacDonald, 2011, para. 7). Clearly Cooper serves many more than just the stressed students of Harvard medical school.

## **Risk Factors and Resolutions**

Since there are so many benefits to having therapy dogs work in schools, why are they not seen more often? The obvious answer for many would be allergies considering that, as much as 10% of the population in the U.S. is allergic to dogs (“Hypoallergenic Dogs,” 2017). However, many of the dogs being incorporated in therapy dog programs are breeds that are considered to be hypoallergenic, these breeds have a “non-shedding coat which produces less dander (“Hypoallergenic Dogs,” 2017). Dander is what causes pet allergies in humans, and although there is no one dog to be considered completely hypoallergenic there are many breeds that do very well with those who typically have pet allergies (Hypoallergenic Dogs,” 2017).

**Top breeds.** The main difference between therapy dogs and service dogs is that service dogs perform specific tasks while therapy dogs are more requested for their loving temperament. Due to this, certain dog breeds make for better therapy dogs than others. Many schools opt for a hypoallergenic dog such as the standard poodle. The poodle’s coat sheds little to no hair and the Poodle’s demeanor is noble and good natured (Senior Care Staff, 2012). Another dog that is highly recommended as a therapy, especially for use in young children is the Saint Bernard. Even though they grow to be very large dogs that usually weight around 110 to 200 pounds when full grown, they are very obedient and patient dogs (Senior Care Staff, 2012). This breed is also well known for patients, which is why they can be trusted not to snap at children who may tug on their fur or tail. The Saint Bernard is also well known for their desire to protect and their keen sense of smell which is why they were used as rescue dogs for those who got

trapped in snow during avalanches in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Senior Care Staff, 2012). Due to their work as rescue dogs in the past there, “desire to protect has not faded with time, and is a quality that you can trust around small children who may need a watchful eye” (Senior Care Staff, 2012).

Similar to the past of the Saint Bernard, is the Golden Retriever which is another breed commonly used as a therapy dog. The Golden Retriever was also used as a search and rescue dog in the past. Due to this, the breed has a strong eagerness to please and is a very smart and quick to learn. As mentioned before, it is important to look at the dog’s temperament and ability to be trained when choosing a therapy dog. Also, dogs come in all shapes and sizes, and both small and large dogs can make great therapy dogs. Even though any dog can make a good therapy dog based on temperament, there are specific breeds that are often used.

For small dogs these breeds are, Chihuahua, Corgi, French Bulldog, Pug, King Charles Spaniel, Dachshund, Bichon Frise, Beagle, Yorkie, and Pomeranian. For those who chose to utilize large breeds as therapy dogs the large breed dogs typically utilized are; Golden Retriever, Labrador Retriever, German Shepherd, Greyhound, Rottweiler, Saint Bernard, Poodle, Great Dane, Mastiff, Bernese Mountain Dog (“Therapy Dogs,” 2016). An additional recommendation is from “Autism Speaks” (2017), “If you’re considering purchasing or adopting a dog, we suggest golden retrievers, labs and labradoodles (lab-poodle mixes) because these breeds tend to have a calm temperament and high intelligence” (para. 12).

**Temperament.** There are multiple steps that an owner and dog must take in order to be a certified therapy dog team. The specific steps are what ensure the safety of the dog being used in a therapy setting. All these dogs have been socialized to new people, settings and objects. An American Canine Citizen Good title as well as the advanced title, trains the dogs to not jump on people and they go through a distraction proof class. They also learn, look, leave it, and loose leash walking as a part of this certification. Finally, the dog must be registered with the National Therapy Dog Association. “This is highly recommended as most therapy dog organizations provide support, advice, and insurance” (“Training Your Dog to be a Therapy Dog,” 2015, para. 11).

Although the therapy dog being used in the school will be trained and have a good temperament this still does not eliminate the fact that some students have great fear toward dogs. However, since the dogs do not pose any threat to these students this can be used as a great learning opportunity:

“There is no doubt that some children have had very traumatic experiences with a pet and thus have a severe fear of contact with a dog for example. Because the therapy dog program is implemented by permission or voluntarily, and only in areas where unwanted contact with a dog can be avoided, the fear issue can be minimized. Experience and research has also shown that with proper guidance and handling, children can learn to overcome their fear of animals and with it, grow in respect and appreciation of them.” (“Charlotte's Litter,” 2014, para. 16).

Generally, therapy dogs are picked for their good temperament before entering a program that allows them to learn good temperament around people as well as important commands. For example, Cooper the therapy dog that works at the Harvard medical school library as mentioned before was said to be born for the job. “Ever since he was young, we realized that Cooper has a very calm demeanor and he is sensitive to people’s emotions,” says Dr. Loise Francisco (as cited in Junge & MacDonald, 2015, para. 4). It is special dogs like Cooper that are picked to be part of a therapy dog program.

**Sanitary issues.** Another valid risk factor that the dogs carry mainly in a hospital setting, but the problem can be applied to a school setting as well is that many doctors believe that since many people are petting the dog during the day that bacteria and viruses can be spread easier because of the dog. Although a valid point, it is important to remember that “There are very few bacteria/viruses that dogs and humans can share in common, so the concern is strictly with bacteria that might travel from patient to patient.” (“Animal Assisted Therapy; Pro or Con?,” 2012, para. 4). To help eliminate the risk of the bacteria being spread it is suggested to keep hand sanitizer or to wash your hands after petting a dog, as is recommended with all dogs.

**Lack of research.** Interestingly, Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) is actually a rather recent concept. It began in the 1990’s and because of this, many argue there is not a significant amount of research on the topic to prove if there really is benefits the use of therapy dogs (Uyemura, 2016). However, with overwhelming number of articles that rave about the benefits of these dogs it is almost hard to find anything negative about them.

**Funding.** Another potential draw back to having a therapy dog program is funding. There are many costs to consider when owning a therapy dog. A therapy dog has all the normal costs of a regular dog such as food, vet bills, grooming, and medicine plus the cost of therapy dog training and any extra obedience training. Just to get an idea, it is highly recommended that a dog goes to the vet at least once a year for a checkup. The cost of the appointment and physical examination “can vary widely depending on your geographic location and the veterinarian, or clinic, that you choose. The average cost is \$45-\$55” (Allen, 2013, para.5). Aside from the cost of the appointment it is important to consider that the dog will probably be vaccinated as well as have a heartworm test and fecal examination. It is important to do all these things to prevent future health problems and keep the dog happy and healthy. “The average cost for booster shots ranges between \$18-\$25, blood testing for heartworm is generally between \$45-\$50, and the average costs for a fecal exam falls somewhere around \$25-\$45” (Allen, 2013, para. 6). A side from the costs already mentioned sometimes a dog can get sick or injured which is more bills a dog owner must account for.

For a dog to be categorized and able to work as a therapy dog they must be certified. The costs range depending on what program the dog is going through. Typically, the program consists of multiple obedience training classes that can last for a couple weeks to a month or two. “Local community centers, dog daycare operations and some pet stores offer group classes that may range from \$50 to \$125 for four to eight weeks of one-hour sessions” (Shaw, 2015, para. 2). Typically, a therapy dog is easily identifiable by the vest that they wear. This vest runs around \$60 and allows the public to

know that your dog is more than just your pet (“Therapy Dogs,” 2017). It is important to know that pretty much all therapy dog work is voluntary not only in schools, but in places such as nursing homes and hospitals. Usually in a school setting, a guidance counselor may choose to get their personal dog certified and then bring the dog into the school to work with the children a couple days a week. Occasionally outside trainers may offer to come in and work at schools with their therapy dog. But since the work is voluntary and dog are expensive to own this can be contributing to not as many schools utilizing a therapy dog program.

### **Helping Special Needs Students**

**Autistic students.** Many schools take on students with special needs and provide learning environments and special programs to help these students. Typically, many schools have programs for autistic students, “A new government survey of parents indicates that 1 in 50 school-age children have autism spectrum disorder (ASD)” (“Autism Speaks,” 2013, para. 1). So how can a therapy dog help autistic students in schools? Therapy dogs can work with children that have ASD to help the child learn positive social skills and the dog can have a calming effect on the child. In the study, “Can Dogs prime autistic children for therapy?” (2011) found:

Recent research conducted in Portugal reports on a case study of a 12 year old boy with ASD with a history of language delays, poor social skills, aggressive behaviour, and anxiety. He took part in regular one-to-one structured activities with either just his therapist or with his therapist and a certified therapy dog. Sessions were video recorded to assess for differences in his behaviour with or



without the dog being present. When the dog was present, the boy engaged in more positive behaviour (smiling, visual and positive physical contact) and less negative behaviour (physical and verbal aggression, grabbing, self-absorption).

The results indicate the potential of dogs to prime children with ASD so that they may be better able to take part in therapeutic activities (para. 14).

Overall, research supports that animal assisted therapy can be very beneficial for children with autism. “There are many reports from both parents and clinicians that interacting with animals, formally called animal-assisted therapy, can offer both physical and emotional benefits to children with autism” (McCoy, 2017, para. 3). Many autistic children are able to bond with therapy dogs on levels that they cannot do with their peers. These social interactions allow for higher self-confidence and increased overall happiness (McCoy, 2017).

Due to the that autism has many different forms, there is no specific dog breed that is said to help the most, and it is important to keep in mind that in some cases a dog may not help. However, Marguerite Colston the vice president of constituent relations at the Autism society states, “We are hearing more and more from families we serve that therapy dogs have had an overall positive effect on their children” (Colston, 2010, para. 7).

A great example of how beneficial therapy dogs can be to children with Autism is seen at the Anderson center, which is a center for those with Autism who cannot function in school or in their own home. Dr. Rynee runs this center and has incorporated therapy dogs into his programs run at the center. Dr. Rynee explains, “We want to use the dogs as

a medium to achieve or pre- existing educational goals” (as cited in Jones, 2010, para. 11). Many children with Autism, especially with severe cases act as though they are in a world that is their own and is separate from everyone else. The therapy dog is used to construct a bridge to that world, and for many of Dr. Rynee’s patients he has seen the dogs help with that (Jones, 2010). Specifically, Dr. Rynee had a patient who was an eleven-year-old boy and when he was first introduced to the dog he would scream and run away. The boy is non-verbal and request things with gestures. Since working with the center’s therapy dog Shadow, the boy now requests to walk, feed, and pet the dog. The same boy is also prone to tantrums and when he is in the presence of Shadow the dogs calm demeanor helps the boy regain self-control. Overall, the center has had much success with their patients and therapy dogs working together (Jones, 2010).

**Easing depression.** Major depression is unfortunately a very common mental illness that affects a lot of high- school aged students in the United States. According to the article “Depression in Teens”, “It is estimated that about 10 to 15 percent of children and teens are depressed at any given time. Research indicates that one of every four adolescents will have an episode of major depression during high school” (Heller, 2016, para. 2). Although these are some dark statistics, the good news is that depression is very treatable.

The article “Mood Boosting Power of Dogs” explains, studies have shown that dog owners are less likely to suffer from depression when compared to those that do not have a dog. Studies also show that engaging in play with a dog increases levels of serotonin and dopamine, allowing for pet owners to feel more calm and relaxed.

(Robinson & Segal, 2017). Additionally, a common characteristic of depression is self-isolation. When interacting with a dog, this is a new way of communication as opposed to how people usually communicate with other. For those suffering with depression, this special interaction with a dog can lead to less feelings of loneliness. In schools, therapy dogs can be used to help alleviate symptoms of depression in students that are in need of help (“How Pets Help People with Depression,” 2014).

**Help with anxiety.** Similar to depression, many students of all ages are trying to cope with their own anxiety. A therapy dog can help in many ways to alleviate anxiety symptoms in students. According to Alan Beck, the director of the Center for the Human-Animal Bond at Purdue University states, “For one thing, pets keep us anchored in the present and distract us from negative or anxious thoughts” (as cited in, “How Pets help People with Depression,” 2014, para. 4). Research supports that pets help people who are anxious to focus on the present due to the fact that they have to pay attention to the care of their pet.

Aside from helping bring attention to the present, caring for a pet creates a feeling of belonging and helps those with anxiety develop a stronger sense of purpose. This concept was proved in a study conducted by conducted by Jennifer P. Wisdom, PhD, an associate professor of clinical psychology at Columbia University Medical Center and a research scientist at the New York State Psychiatric Institute:

“Wisdom and her colleagues surveyed 177 individuals with mental illness to explore what factors affect recovery from their health problems. The researchers found that companion animals not only boost self-esteem, but also

provide empathy, initiate social encounters, and serve as substitute or additional family members” (as cited in, “How Pets Help People with Depression,” 2014, Para 5).

**Substance abuse.** Many of those suffering with complications from mental illnesses such as anxiety or depression may turn to drugs to help ease symptoms. Dogs can help prevent the symptoms of anxiety and depression. For those trying to recover, therapy dogs “can help recovering addicts stay active, reduce stress and loneliness, and provide a sense of purpose” (“Canine Therapy in Addiction Recovery,” 2012, para. 7). Certain drug treatment centers use therapy dogs to instill certain values such as, teamwork, empathy, trust, and communication to addicts. Recovery is a very difficult process and dogs provided many opportunities to smile and release tension and always offer a nonjudgmental ear (“Canine Therapy in Addiction Recovery,” 2012). Many drug treatment centers have figured out the value of canine companionship during the recovery process, and let patients bring their dogs to treatment which allows for a sense of normalcy to be maintained even when being away from home (“Canine Therapy in Addiction Recovery,” 2012). Even though a dog is far from the only factor when recovering from addiction, they “can be a very powerful source of support, accountability and hope” (“Canine Therapy in Addiction Recovery,” 2012, para. 8).

### **Group Counseling Setting**

In an individual and group setting, a therapy dog can be considered a counselor’s best friend. Perry, Rubenstein, & Austin argue that the use of therapy dogs in mental health settings such as this have been shown “reduce stress, increase rapport, help clients

to become more cognizant of emotional reactions and support resiliency in individual and group sessions” (as cited in Ginicola, 2014, para. 3). As many school counselors know, building rapport with students is essential for effective counseling. The dogs can be used to help build this, as well as work toward specific goals such as social interaction skills and physical skills (McCardle, 2010).

In order to help students toward specific goals, counselors can use the dogs in two main ways, with a directive and or/ non-directive approach. When utilizing the non-directive approach, this refers to when the dog is present in the therapy session and that is all (Ginicola, 2014). The dog is there merely for the presence but is not the main focus of the therapy session. With this method, the dog builds rapport with the counselor, helps connect emotionally to the student(s), and impacts the student or group of students with their presence in the environment (Ginicola, 2014). Some school counselors have chosen to utilize a program called “Mutt-i-grees” and is an example of a non-directive dog themed program that can be used to help teach children kindness, compassion, empathy, understanding of one’s own feelings, and help decision-making skills (Ginicola, 2014). This specific curriculum does not require a live dog, but it makes all activities dog themed. However, many schools have brought dogs into the school to enhance the program and have found the dogs to be an incredibly powerful learning tool (Ginicola, 2014).

Aside from a non-directive approach, counselors can also use the dog in directive ways. This means there is interaction with the dog. Examples of directive techniques with the dog that can be used on students could be, brushing the dog, teaching the dog a trick,

or having the student pet the dog when talking about highly emotional issues (Ginicola, 2014).

### **Summary**

Therapy dogs have a long list of benefits for students in an educational setting. Their ability to aide in stress reduction is so important for students of all ages. The dogs provide benefits for students on mental, social, emotional, and physical levels. They can help relieve anxiety and teach important skills, such as proper social interaction or build confidence in students that are otherwise too nervous to read to other adults.

With all the benefits of therapy dogs, it is also important to keep in mind potential risks that they can bring to a school setting. Some dogs may aggravate allergies for students, so many schools may opt for a hypoallergenic dog. Also, even though these dogs are chosen based on their calm and agreeable temperament there is still risk of potential biting or scratching. The dogs can also be carriers for germs, however taking the proper sanitary precautions can greatly eliminate the spread of germs. One of the largest draw backs of the program is that it is mainly voluntary. So those who choice to bring in the dogs to the school, are usually not getting paid any extra to do so and are also paying for the costs of owning a dog.

Therapy dogs can also be brought into schools to help students with special needs. Autistic students can use the dogs to bond and help increase social interactions for overall happiness and self- confidence. For those suffering with depression, the interaction with the dog increases the happy hormones and decreases self-isolation. Anxiety suffers can also be helped in a similar way as they help people to remain in the present and provide a

distraction for negative thoughts. They can also be used for those recovering from substance abuse to help with the healing process by providing the patient with support and a sense of purpose. Finally, the dogs can be used in group counseling sessions to help counselors build rapport with students and help student work toward specific goals.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Participants**

The current study involved ten separate schools across the United States. The schools that were chosen, advertised their use of a therapy dog program either online or in the newspaper. The participants that were emailed were the ones that had the most involvement in the therapy program at their school, this information was attained online. Participants contacted were school principals, guidance counselors, school's psychologist's and social workers. It is not clear what the particular age or ethnicity of those who answered the survey is since all contact was made via email.

#### **Materials and Design**

Data collection took place during spring semester of 2017. Schools were selected based on their advertisement of a therapy dog program for on the school website. Colleges were not part of the survey since many questions pertained to students that are elementary through high school age. The positive and negative effects of using therapy dogs in a school environment were assessed through a questionnaire developed by the principle researcher (see Appendix A). The questions were created after research on the possible positive and negatives of using therapy dogs in a school setting. The questions are to get a better understand of the possible hardships schools may face when implementing a program in their school as well as the benefits it can have on their students, especially those with special needs. The survey consists of ten separate questions. Eight of the questions were "yes or no" questions, and a space was provided for any detail the participant would like to add to the question. One question utilizes the



likert scale which ranges from one to ten, one being the program did not help students at all to ten meaning the program was extremely beneficial to students. One question consisted of a multiple-choice answer, with four possible choices from A through D. It was assumed that all individuals who answered the survey, answered honestly and with understanding of what the question was asking. Some of the questioned aimed to get a better understand any difficulties schools may have with the program. More specifically asked about instances with students with allergies, dog temperament, and parent/ staff reaction to the working in the school.

### **Procedure**

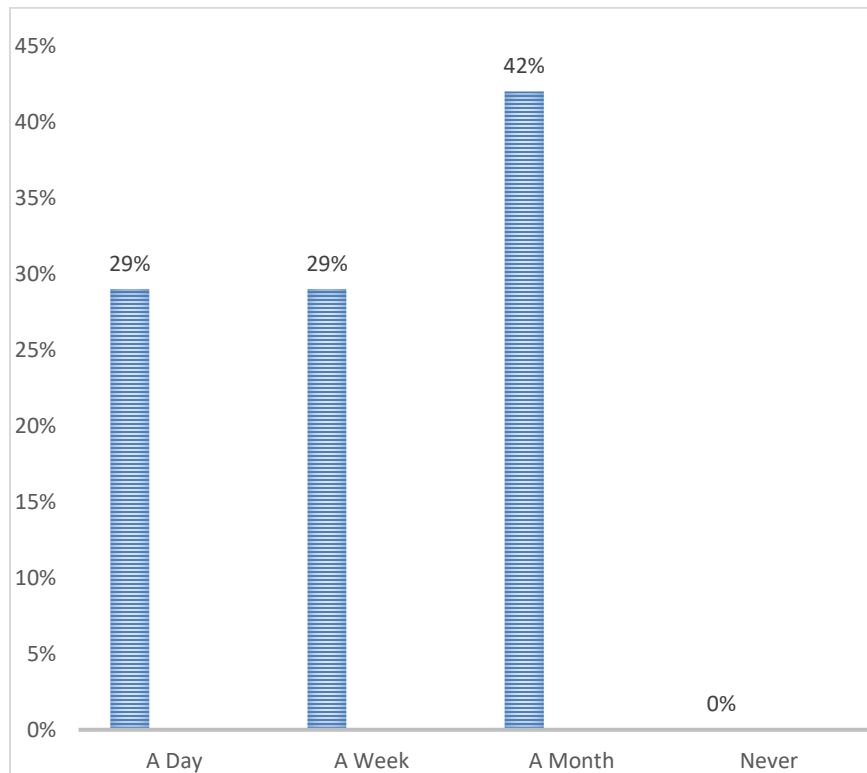
Participants accessed the questionnaire through a link provided in the email to Qualtrics. Data collection took place from April 12<sup>th</sup> 2017 to April 19<sup>th</sup> 2017. The survey took a maximum of five minutes for participants to complete. After all surveys were complete, data was collected and analyzed by the researcher. Data was analyzed descriptively. Each question was broken into percentages to see how the majority of participants responded to each question. Responses were used to compare the positive and negative aspects of having a therapy dog program in a school. The data used attained from the multiple-choice question was graphed for a visual representation of different participant responses.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

The first hypothesis addressed if there was a relationship between lower stress levels in students and higher academic achievement. Seven out of ten total participants completed the therapy dogs survey. 71% of participants agreed with the statement, “Has the dog helped improve student learning?” meaning that students have benefited academically from the use of the therapy dog program. Additionally, 100% of participants agreed with question 7 of the survey that asked “Has the therapy dog been able to significantly help students with special needs, such as autistic, ADHD, or students with social issues?”. Question 9 involved a likert scale where participants were asked to rate how strongly they believed the therapy program has benefitted students on a scale of 1 (meaning not much help) to 10 (meaning very helpful). 86% of participants gave the therapy dog a 10, 14% gave the program a 3.

The second hypothesis was that positive attitude toward the therapy dog program would facilitate better student learning. The survey had multiple questions dedicated to examining the overall attitude of the program. 100% of participants agreed with the statement, “Have parents been open to the idea of having the dog work in the school with their children?”. Question 5, a multiple-choice question had four separate answers in regards to the question of how long it took for students/staff/ and parents to get used to having the dog in the school. 29% answered “A”, the first day; 29% answered “B”, a week; 42% answered “C” a month; and 0% answered D, many are still uncomfortable with the program. This is represented visually in figure 1 bellow.



*Figure 1.* Time it took to adjust to therapy dogs in schools.

Also, 100% of participants agreed that they would recommend other schools to use a therapy dog. Another question examining overall attitude toward the program asked, “Do you think using a therapy dog helps set your school apart from the rest?”, 86% of participants agreed with this statement. 100% of participants knew of others schools that utilize therapy dogs. Other questions of the survey were used to look at the

positives or negatives of having a therapy dog in a school. 57% of participants answered that there have been no incidents with the dog. Additionally, 71% answered that there have been no draw backs to using the dog.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

#### **Summary**

The present study was designed to examine the positive and negative aspects of bringing a therapy dog into a school. More specifically, the study was designed to see if the lower stress levels the dogs created in students helped with learning. The study also examined if an overall positive attitude toward the program was beneficial to student learning. By identifying the percent of answers that agreed with therapy dogs being beneficial to student learning and percent of answers that agreed many had a positive overall attitude toward the program, it can be inferred that a therapy dog program can be beneficial to student learning.

Through the percentage of questions that were answered with a 50% or more by participants on the positives that therapy dogs have brought to the school and improvement on student learning, it can be inferred that the program is helpful to students. It can also be inferred that although there are some negatives to having a dog in a school, the questions showed that their positive effects on students outweigh the negatives.

#### **Implications**

Results from the present study show high rates of success for students when therapy dogs are being used in school. The dogs can not only help students achieve academic success but they can also be helpful in a counseling setting as well. With these results in mind, more schools should consider implementing a dog therapy program. If more schools

had a therapy dog program their students would be likely to benefit from the program the same way students do in schools that already have therapy dogs.

Since this program is usually voluntary, a counselor/ principle/ social worker must be enthusiastic about not only their students but animals as well. Perhaps if there was more knowledge spread about all the potential benefits therapy dogs can have for students, there would be more schools willing to bring the dogs in. Also, if extra pay was implemented into the school's budget for programs such as this, there may be more motivation and an increase in therapy dog programs used in schools.

### **Limitations**

The study consisted of only 7 separate schools who answered the survey. A larger sample size would have resulted in more accurate information about the positives and negatives of therapy dogs. Additionally, the questions were thought of by the researcher and were not based on an existing data that exemplifies how to weight the risks and benefits of using a therapy dog program in schools. The survey also excluded colleges and universities.

Furthermore, the survey consisted of only 10 questions, with only 4 questions addressing the attitude toward the program, 3 questions addressing student learning, and 3 about the positives and negatives of the program. Therefore, the questionnaire may not have accurately assessed all of the variables in the study.

### **Future Directions**

The current study used the categories of student learning and attitude to assess the benefits of having a therapy dog program in schools. Future studies should include a larger

sample size and more concrete questions that examine more positive and negative aspects of implementing a therapy dog program in school for students. Future studies would also benefit from incorporating higher level education institutions such as colleges and universities into the study to be able to have more information from students who chose to continue their education.

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## Appendix

### Therapy Dog Questionnaire

1. Do you know of other schools that use therapy dogs? (Yes/No).
  
2. Have parents been open to the idea of having the dog work in the school with their children? (Yes/No/ Half and half).
  
3. Have there been any incidents with the dog? (bites, allergies, students who are afraid of dogs)  
(Yes/No, if so please explain).
  
4. Has the dog helped improve student learning? (Yes/No; if so how?)
  
5. How long did it take for the students/ staff/ parents to get used to having the dog in the school?
  - a. The first day
  - b. A week
  - c. A month
  - d. Many are still uncomfortable

