

WEAVING TRAUMA, CONNECTION, BELONGING, AND EMPATHY WITH THERAPY
DOGS THROUGH SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

by

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A Paper

Presented to the Gordon Albright School of Education

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Education

EGC640 School Counselling Project

November 2023

**Weaving Trauma, Connection, Belonging, and Empathy with Therapy Dogs Through
Social Emotional Learning**

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Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge my incredible husband, Chris, for his unwavering support along this journey. Through the countless hours of encouragement, he provided along the way, to the unconditional love and support he always gave me- even when I felt like giving up. I could not have made it through these past few years without you. Thank you.

To my parents, Carole and Kevin, and my brother Cody, thank you for always believing in me and reminding me that I can do anything I set my mind to. I am forever grateful for all your love and support. To Beau, Simba, and Benny, your purrs and warmth kept me going on those late nights. Thank you.

To Kendal and Jenna, thank you for your kindness and friendship throughout this entire degree. For always sharing your thoughts and wisdom. I am truly grateful our paths crossed. Thank you.

Dedication

To Audi and Arlo- my daily inspirations to be a better human, dog mom, teacher, and now counsellor. The true inspirations behind this capstone and it is dedicated to the both of you. You two have given me more love than you will ever know, and I am so proud to be your dog mom. You both remind me not to sweat the small stuff- (it's all small stuff) and to remember that life is too short. From bringing me toys when I was overwhelmed, to licking my tears away, and to sleeping through all the online classes. You both are honorary counsellors. I could never repay you both enough in treats and bones. Thank you for choosing me to be your human.



Arlo and Audi, Photo by Selby Pellow

Abstract

As social emotional learning and mental health becomes more of a focus for school districts, so much so, as to include them as a target in strategic plans, it is vital that districts utilize non-traditional methods to support students. The use of therapy dogs to support emotional wellbeing is not new to the school system, but successful integration to see therapy dogs and their handlers as a team to teach the social emotional curriculum, is an area that is still being researched. The goal of this capstone is to provide educators, school counsellors, and school districts with information around enhancing social emotional learning for students with trauma in schools with the use of therapy dogs. Using the foundations of attachment theory, animal assisted therapy, and person-centered theory, in chapter 3 I will propose a series of lessons aimed at incorporating the use of therapy dogs into the SEL curriculum for students in kindergarten to grade three. It is hoped that this capstone will provide school districts with an outline to support the integration of a therapy dog program into their social emotional learning curriculums, to best support students with trauma.

Keywords: animal assisted therapy, complex trauma, human animal interactions, social emotional learning, therapy dog

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Weaving Trauma, Connection, Belonging, and Empathy, Through Therapy Dogs

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

As social emotional needs and mental health concerns become more paramount in schools, it is vital that alternative therapeutic methods are explored. School counselors and classroom teachers simply cannot meet the needs of all these students. Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) has been recognized as a form of therapy with many benefits.

As an early primary classroom teacher for the past ten years, I have taught many students with traumatic backgrounds who come from difficult home circumstances, are diagnosed with mental health disorders, and/or have emotional regulation struggles. Many of these students have struggled in the traditional school model. As Neufeld and Maté (2013) explain, “many parents and teachers still believe that we should be able to put a capable student with a good teacher and get results. It never quite worked that way” (p.166).

It was through my volunteer work through St. John’s Ambulance, with my own therapy dog that I saw the profound impact therapy dogs can have on people. Therapy dogs can provide physiological, psychosocial, and social support (Frisen, 2010 as cited in Zents, et al. 2017).

While my own therapy dog primarily worked in long term care homes and hospice, I noticed the impact he was having on the residents and clients. It gave them something to look forward to as well as served as a conversational starter between residents. In addition, the physical touch and bond that the dogs created with residents provided a comfort to them. When I saw how much joy the therapy dogs brought to the residents, I thought about their presence could be incorporated

into the school system and counseling office in working with those high needs and at-risk students.

Many of these students experience big emotions and are sent for a break in the sensory room and then back to the classroom, only for the cycle to continue. I began to wonder if there was something else, we could offer them or something we could add to our school that could serve as a conduit to emotional regulation, but in the form of a therapy dog? While therapy dogs cannot fix trauma, it can allow students to have a positive emotional interaction and allow them to regulate themselves enough to change the course of their day (Geist, 2011).

In this chapter, I will explore the background behind my research question and the significance of this research. Additionally, I will define key terms that will be used throughout this capstone. In the next chapter, I will review the literature on animal assisted therapy, attachment theory, and person-centered theory. I will also review current social emotional learning programs in elementary schools and review the current research on therapy dogs in schools in British Columbia. In chapter 3, I will propose an outline to support the integration of therapy dog programs into school districts social emotional learning curriculums, to best support students with trauma.

Background to the Research Problem

In 1970, Boris Levinson, the father of Animal Assisted Therapy, predicted that mental health concerns would become so overwhelming that the current system would not be able to meet the needs of all the individuals (Levinson, 1970, as cited in Zents et al, 2017). The school system is not immune to this overwhelming need, and this was exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Weisbrot & Ryst, 2020). In BC Public Schools, the current way for teachers to access mental health supports for their students in school, is through a referral through the School Based

Team (SBT). From the SBT, referrals are made to appropriate specialized teachers, such as counsellors in most districts, or the behaviour resource team (BRT). As of July 2021, the ratio of school counsellors to students is approximately 1:600 (BC Public School Employers' Association, 2021). Additionally, with many districts facing budget pressures, counselling positions in many districts have been offered as potential cutbacks for cost saving measures (Bell, 2022). Furthermore, with teacher shortages across British Columbia, oftentimes school counsellors are being pulled to cover classroom teachers' absences, leaving counselling positions vacant (BCTF Meets with Rachna Singh, Minister of Education and Child Care, 2023).

Often, support for students comes down to budgets and the financial implications. The salary for a BC school counsellor with a master's degree in School Counselling is dependent on the district and years of teaching experience, but most range from \$69,243 to \$106, 217 (School District 72 Salary Grid, 2023). As therapy dogs can be from a variety of breed lineages and each district has their own policies surrounding training of therapy dogs, it is sufficient to say that while they cannot replace a school counsellor, it is much more cost effective to fund them.

For students with intensive behaviours, trauma, or complex trauma, school districts must utilize all alternatives to traditional methods. As Geoff Johnson (2023), a retired Superintendent explains, "as the number of claims and the injury rate related to workplace violence in K-12 schools rose steadily between 2015 and 2019", it is evident that schools are becoming more complex and all methods of support for students need to be explored (p.1). This is where therapy dogs can come in.

Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature surrounding therapy dogs and their ability to assist students with trauma develop connection, belonging, and empathy skills. I will

also review the literature on successful therapy dog program implementation in schools.

Additionally, I will explore the limitations and concerns around having therapy dogs in school classrooms. I will also delve into how Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs can be adapted to include therapy dogs as teachers.

Research Question or Thesis Statement

Therapy dogs provide vast amounts of opportunities for students to create impactful bonds, connectedness, and a sense of belonging, something that many students with trauma don't have the opportunity to experience. The questions this capstone will seek to answer are:

- Can therapy dogs serve as a bridge between counsellors and students to have a lasting positive effect, emotionally, psychologically, or physiologically?
- Can therapy dogs be incorporated into adapted SEL programs in schools?

Positionality Statement

It is important to acknowledge that while I have always been an animal lover, I am cognizant of the fact that animals are not everyone's favourite and there are some cultures where dogs are regarded as unsanitary or a nuisance (Jalongo et al., 2004). Due to allergies, fears, apprehension, or a variety of reasons, some people prefer to not interact with animals- and that should be respected, and the implementation of a therapy dog program should be approached with cultural responsiveness (Jalongo et al., 2004).

It was my own therapy dog, Audi, who came into my life when I had moved away from my family for the first time that inspired my love of dogs. I feel it was fate that our paths crossed, as I was about to leave the North Peace SPCA after dropping off cat donations, and something inside me said, "just go look at the dogs." The moment I saw him, I knew we would be best friends. Audi is a Great Pyrenees/German Shepherd mix, not your typical therapy dog. He's a

giant rescue weighing about 120lbs that I adopted at 10 weeks old. But his gentle nature, loyalty, empathy, and constant affection suggested to me that he might be a perfect therapy dog. He encountered many painful surgeries early on to correct hip dysplasia, which I believe led him to wanting to support and comfort people. Audi and I trained as a therapy dog team through St. John's Ambulance from 2018 to 2023 and he recently passed his child certification. He has spent time with patients in their final moments in hospice, visited his favourite clients in long term care, and brought joy to children in community events and libraries. Audi has been featured in many BCSPCA articles and news stories promoting adoption and therapy dogs around the province.



Audi St. John's Ambulance Therapy Dog -Photo by Selby Pellow

In my ten years of experience as a classroom teacher, I have experienced and seen first-hand, the burnout that many teachers and counsellors are facing around the pressures the school system is facing. When I would go home at the end of the day, it was Audi that would be there to greet me at the door and bring me his toys when he knew I was upset. As an early primary teacher, I have always placed a heavy influence on incorporating SEL into my classroom. While the curriculum was absorbed by most students, those that could benefit the most, had a difficult time understanding and connecting with the material presented. To foster connection with my

students, I often shared stories about my dogs, Audi and Arlo, and these stories resonated with the kids. They would repeatedly ask, “when can Audi and Arlo visit?” It not only sparked conversation amongst my students, but allowed them something to look forward to and brought some humor to our day. I thought, why can’t we integrate dogs into schools more often and use them to solidify understanding of SEL? It is my hope that therapy dogs can not only become more of a fixture in schools, but also be used to connect to SEL teaching.

Significance of the Study

I hope that my capstone will provide additional evidence to support using more therapy dogs in schools to assist all students in coping with trauma and learn skills such as empathy, connection, and belonging. This research will benefit me as a new school counselor as I will learn alternative theories such as AAT and how to support students coping with trauma. Additionally, I can use what I learn to advocate to have more therapy dogs in schools and provide School Districts with the benefits therapy dogs can bring to the classroom and help them mitigate potential concerns that may arise. Furthermore, it is my hope that an adaptation of SEL programs to include the use of therapy dogs as additional teachers in the classroom will help material resonate more with students, and increase their understanding of concepts like empathy, belonging, and connection.

Definition of Terms

- *Animal Assisted Counselling (AAC)*- “AAC is a goal-directed process in which a trained mental health practitioner and animal team work together to help clients resolve mental health and behavioral challenges and achieve growth using the therapeutic powers of human–animal interaction” (Hartwig & Pliske, 2023, p.147).
- *Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI)*- “The term AAI encompasses a wide spectrum of

therapeutic interventions with animals, including animal assisted therapy (AAT), animal-assisted activities, and animal-assisted education” (Fine, 2018, p.144).

- *Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT)*- “Animal-assisted therapy is the use of trained animals, including therapy dogs, to meet intervention goals” (Friesen, 2010; Lupton, Fisk, & Lauback, 2015 as cited in Zents et al., 2017, p.2).
- *Companion Animal*: Companion Animals live with a family and are pets. They have no mandatory training and provide emotional support to their owners.
- *Complex Trauma*- A subtype of trauma. The exposure of multiple or chronic and prolonged, developmentally adverse traumatic events, most often of interpersonal nature and early-life onset. These exposures occur within the child’s caregiving system and include physical, emotional and educational neglect and child maltreatment beginning in early childhood” (Spinazzola et al., 2005, p. 433 as cited in Dye, 2018 p.382).
- *Emotional Support Animal (ESA)*- “Emotional support animals (ESAs) are considered companion animals that provide therapeutic support to a person with a mental illness” (Fine, 2018, p.144).
- *Facility Dog*- “Facility dogs are regularly present in a residential or clinical setting. They may live with a handler who is an employee of the facility and come to work each day or may live at the facility full time under the care of a primary handler. Facility dogs receive special training and may be used for AAA, AAE, or AAT. These animals do not have special rights of access in public unless they are accompanying or supporting a person with a disability.” (Kropp & Shupp, 2017, p.1)
- *Human biophilia*- “Human biophilia describes the interest in and attention toward animals and nature, based on human evolutionary history” (Beetz, 2013, p.3)

- *Human-Animal Bond (HAB)*- “Human-animal bond is a popular umbrella term applied to the kinds of social attachments that typically develop between people and their pets (or companion animals)” (Serpell, 2015, p.1)
- *Human-animal interactions (HAI)*- Described “as the mutual and dynamic exchange between humans and animals” (Griffin et al. 2011, as cited in Hartwick & Plisck, 2023, p.147).
- *Service Dog*- “Service dogs are individually trained (not by the owner) to do work or perform tasks for people with specific disabilities, such as guide dogs for the blind, alerting people who are deaf, calming a person who has post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), dogs who provide mobility assistance, or communicate medical alerts for individuals with diabetes or epilepsy, for example. These dogs also greatly enhance the quality of the lives of their owners with a new sense of independence and freedom. Assistance dogs are considered working animals, not pets. These dogs are permitted to accompany a person with a disability almost anywhere, including restaurants, businesses, and airplanes” (Kropp & Shupp, 2017, p.1).
- *Social Emotional Learning (SEL)*- “Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process of acquiring the competencies to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, establish relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations effectively” (School District No. 38 (Richmond), n.d., p.1).
- *Therapy Dog*- “A therapy dog provides comfort and affection, and their handlers are volunteers who visit hospitals, schools, nursing homes, hospice, libraries, and other facilities. These therapy animals have no special rights and must have the permission of

the facility to visit. There are usually requirements such as grooming, providing veterinarian records, and proof of certification” (Kropp & Shupp, 2017, p.1).

- *Therapy-Dog Handler*- Therapy-dog handlers are partnerships between a handler and their therapy dog. Therapy dogs are certified by a sponsoring organization. These handlers are typically the dogs’ owners. Therapy-dog handlers carry out AAI in their communities voluntarily.
- *Trauma*- “Trauma is described as a perceived experience that threatens injury, death, or physical integrity and causes feelings of fear, terror, and helplessness. Exposure to traumatic experiences are wide-spread and do not discriminate against gender, age, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. These experiences may occur during a single event (acute) or as a result of repeated (chronic) exposure” (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, as cited in Dye, 2018).

Chapter Summary and Outline of the Remainder of the Paper

In this chapter, I outlined the need for alternative methods to assisting students with trauma and complex trauma with the school system. I explained the ratio of school counsellors to students, and briefly explained some of the benefits therapy dogs can bring. Additionally, I explained some of the financial pressures that many school districts in BC are facing and how therapy dogs could serve as a bridge. I then outlined the significance of my research, and how I envision therapy dogs being incorporated into the school system and my positionality statement on the topic. Furthermore, I included a list of definitions of commonly used terms that will be used throughout the paper.

In chapter 2, I will review the literature around incorporating therapy dogs successfully into the school system. I will use John Bowlby’s Attachment Theory, Carl Roger’s Person-

Centered Theory, and Levinson's Animal Assisted Therapy as theoretical backgrounds. I will also explain the neurobiology of dogs, the importance of the SEL curriculum, the current policies and procedures surrounding therapy dogs in various school districts across BC as examples, and finally explain some limitations and barriers that exist when integrating therapy dogs into schools. In chapter 3, I will discuss the implications of the research, and provide recommendations on how to mitigate some areas of concern. Additionally, I will provide a sample of lessons of an adapted SEL program, with successful therapy dog integration.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter, I will review the research surrounding the use of therapy dogs in schools. Additionally, I will review how therapy dogs can be used to assist students with trauma learn several social skills relating to empathy, connection, and belonging through SEL programs. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how therapy dogs can be integrated successfully into schools and review the policies and procedures around them.

I will first discuss the impact of trauma on child development before launching into my theories employed in this capstone: John Bowlby's Attachment theory, Carl Rogers Person Centered Theory (PCT), and Levinson's Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT).

Child Development and Trauma

Childhood trauma can significantly affect neurobiology and cause long-term consequences including physical, mental, and emotional symptoms into adulthood (Dye, 2018). As educators and counsellors, we must be aware of children's development and be trauma informed to be most effective in supporting our students. As Gabor Máté (2008) explains, "the greatest damage done by neglect, trauma or emotional loss is not the immediate pain they inflict but the long-term distortions they induce in the way a developing child will continue to interpret the world and her situation in it" (p.354). When children encounter relationships characterized as dismissive or unsecure, these encounters have the potential to reshape a child's perception of self, trust in others, and worldview (Dye, 2018). In schools, oftentimes we see "the fight, flight, freeze, response come out as students are overstimulated and have difficulty with emotional regulation. Often, anger comes out as a large emotion as a reaction" (Walkley & Cox, 2013, p.123). The solution to these large emotions varies on a teacher's capacity in the moment. This

can depend on the proximity to other students, the scale of the emotional reaction, availability of other staff members to support, and the training of the staff members that are engaging with the student. In my experience, as a classroom teacher, we need to think about the safety of all students, and so we oftentimes remove the rest of the class, or the student experiencing a large emotional reaction, and ask them to take a break to calm down, take a walk, etc. As Gordon Neufeld explains “the way to children’s minds has always been through their hearts” (Neufeld & Maté, 2013, p. 173). To teach students how to develop healthy coping skills, educators and counsellors must first understand how children form attachments.

Attachment Theory

John Bowlby’s attachment theory is based on the biological need that all humans seek out security and protection from a caregiver (Bowlby, 1969). Attachment is complex and stems from a child’s interaction between the caregiver and child which shapes how the child views and behaves in relationships later in life (Bowlby, 1969). Zents et al (2017) included Bowlby’s summary of attachment theory:

Attachment behaviour is any form of behaviour that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other dearly identified individual who is conceived as better able to cope with the world...It is regarding as an integral part of human nature and one we share (to a varying extent) with other members of other species. The biological function attributed to it is that of protection. To remain within easy access of a familiar individual known to be ready and willing to come to our aid in an emergency is clearly a good insurance policy-whatever our age. (p. 84)

Bruneau and Johnson (2011) explored psychoanalytic theory, which focuses on how childhood experiences and development affects and influences responses to stimuli (often in an

impulsive or subconscious manner), and how it could be applied alongside Animal Assisted Therapy or, in our case, the use of therapy dogs. With regards to attachment theory, they concluded that the use of animals serves as a catalyst in the development of safety, security, “trust, autonomy, initiative, identity” and other similar feelings (Bruneau & Johnson, 2011, p.5). Essentially, they concluded that therapy dogs’ genuine and reliable nature/being, which demonstrates unconditional care and love, helps clients’ fear of abandonment; this might be one of the first times that students receive and experience nurturing (Bruneau & Johnson, 2011).

Bergin and Bergin (2009) applied Bowlby’s Attachment theory in the school classroom setting by describing four basic types of attachment: secure, insecure/avoidant, insecure/resistant, insecure/disorganized-disoriented. Secure children and youth have several close attachment figures, which provides them with safety and appropriate support, that allows for exploration, growth, and healthy development. Insecure/avoidant children are much more distant or withdrawn from attachment figures, often because the latter has been insensitive or unavailable; the resulting conflict and anger tends to promote indifference and the suppression of emotions. Insecure/resistant children have difficulty interpreting or receiving emotional connection or support from their attachment figures; this often results in the child having exaggerated emotions and difficulty shifting towards independence (e.g., clingy, manipulative and/or dependent behavioural). Insecure/disorganized-disoriented children have a distant and confused or unusual response and relationship with their attachment figures (who themselves are often unhealthy or maladapted); these children often feel apprehensive/uncertain, overly stressed, and tend to overcompensate emotionally and behaviorally. This is where therapy dogs can support students. As explained in Beetz (2013) “calm and relaxed animals could promote human calmness, relaxation, and reduction of stress in humans even without direct physical contact” (p.3).

Through the presence and observation of therapy dogs, students with insecure attachment can learn vital regulation skills.

Bergin and Bergin (2009) reviewed further research and concluded that secure children do well, avoidant and resistant children have moderate outcomes, and disorganized children struggle the most. Essentially, they concluded that children with healthy attachment figures (e.g., caregivers, teachers) and well-developed skills and abilities (e.g., independence, confidence, sociability and awareness, emotional regulation, attentive focus, good general/mental health, etc.) have tremendously improved school-based outcomes. Therefore, the addition of therapy dogs in their classroom would add to their experience, not diminish.

For children lacking those foundational components, it would make sense that incorporating external supports, such as therapy dogs, can help meet their needs and facilitate academic and social success.

Developing Secure Attachments in School

Within the Attachment Theory realm, one's Internal Working Model (IWM) "informs them about their own self-worth and the dependability of others to provide needed attention and care...and is the mechanism by which early experiences influence the quality of later attachment relationships" (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004, p.248). Therefore, those that have developed secure attachment will have more confidence and an easier time developing connections with new caregivers such as their teachers; the "dependability" and "responsiveness" shifts from the primary caregiver (typical mother or father) to the teacher who is tasked with shaping and guiding behavioural characteristics and emotional regulation (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004, p.248).

Children who have developed secure attachment (e.g., raised with appropriate and responsive caregivers) are generally more curious and confident in new environments. Their internal perception is that of competence and feeling “worthy of respect” which allows them to relate and connect with others more quickly and deeply; essentially, their more advanced social development results in increased flexibility, emotional control, attention, and overall grades (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). One of the key observable markers of securely attached children is their ability to engage and collaborate with others; they generally have more “satisfying interpersonal relationships and greater trust of others” as well as “a more positive, integrated view of self, are more prone to positive self-disclosure, and cope more adaptively with stressful situations (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004, p.249). These securely attached children, have more “feelings of emotional security, which are necessary to guarantee enjoyment and exploration of the child's environment” (Beckh & Becker-Stoll, 2016 as cited in García-Rodríguez et al., 2023, p. 1).

In contrast, children with insecure attachment, and particularly for those who have also experienced “low SES, a chaotic home environment, and inconsistent/hostile/rejecting maternal behavior,” increases the likelihood of the child “internalizing and externalizing behaviour problems” (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004, p.249). Insecure attachment results when a caregiver is unable to meet the child’s needs (Bowlby, 1973, as cited in Levy, 2019) and Kennedy and Kennedy (2004) highlighted that the current body of research suggests that one’s attachment category will impact “social, emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes” (p.249). This is echoed by Bosmans, (2020) who argued that children can become insecure, anxious, and distant when a caregiver does not meet their needs.

The remaining attachment categories are greatly summarized as follows: anxious-avoidant children tend to have difficulty trusting others, making close emotional connections and often display antisocial behaviours; anxious-resistant children have more exaggerated behavioural responses and tend to lack confidence in new settings; and disorganized attachment is characterized as the most maladaptive category where aggressive and disruptive behaviours are much more common (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). For antisocial behaviours, therapy dogs can “act as an “ice-breaker”: it catalyzes communication and enhances opportunities for social exchange and shared interests which, in turn, can promote a feeling of social integration” adding to the child’s sense of belonging” (Cirulli et al., 2011, p.342). This is echoed by Yordy et al. (2020) as they explain, “because canines naturally provide a sense of safety, comfort, and support, the human-canine interaction in the classroom facilitates students’ social interactions by allowing the students to feel supported” (p.232).

Through therapy dogs, children can learn regulation strategies and increase their level of trust. “Just like dogs that derive affection from touch through petting, very young children experience similar affection from their caregivers by way of gentle touch and physical comfort. Therefore, it is suggested that the inherent value of therapy dogs is its potential to help younger children form a commitment to therapy through forming a comforting attachment to the therapy animal” (Dravnsnik et al., 2018, p.210).

Person Centered Theory

Carl Rogers’ Person-Centered Theory suggests that clients direct and/or lead the session while the counsellor plays more of a passive, yet present, and supportive role; this use of “congruence, communicating empathy, and having unconditional positive regard for the client” is effective as it allows clients to work through challenges and develop their own strategies to

resolve them (Bruneau & Johnson, 2011). A common saying in AAT, is that “all dogs have read Carl Rogers” which highlights that dogs naturally share many of Roger’s core conditions.

Zents et al (2017) tied Rogers’ necessary conditions for change, from his Client/Person Centered Theory, to the use of therapy dogs during sessions as follows: congruency occurs as the dog helps the client remain centered and present; empathetic understanding is sparked when children project their feelings onto the dog, and the child experiences reciprocity from the dog; and unconditional positive regard occurs as the dogs are non-judgmental and are not capable of questioning, criticizing or disappointing the child. Studies and/or surveys indicated that these clients reported high levels of congruency, empathy, and unconditional positive regard; this suggests that the use of therapy dogs was effective in creating an environment of safety (Zents et al, 2017). Additionally, as Reichert (1998, as cited in Zents et al, 2017, p.83) explains, “students may believe that if the dog trusts the therapist, then the students can trust them too.”

Therapy Dogs in Schools

In this section, I will discuss the background of AAT, benefits of therapy dogs in school, and the procedures and policies around therapy dogs in schools.

Animal Assisted Therapy

The first record of AAT is from 1792, in which the Quaker York Retreat in England used rabbits and poultry as a means of therapy (Fine et al., 2019). The AAI field continued to develop in the late 1800’s with Florence Nightingale, when she noticed how the use of small animals had an impact on a reduction of anxiety in children and adults in psychiatric hospitals (Ernst, 2014). In the 1930’s Sigmund Freud furthered the development of AAT, though the therapeutic implications were not known until after his death. He used his dog, Jofi, to help build the therapeutic bond between him and his patients (Ernst, 2014). Jofi helped Freud’s clients to

become more comfortable to talking with Freud and aided in the establishment of the therapeutic alliance. In the early 1960's Boris Levinson observed an unscripted interaction between a child and his dog Jingles during a psychotherapy session. The child had been nonverbal and withdrawn in prior sessions, and this interaction led Levinson to document this experience, and to coin the term, "Pet Therapy" (Fine et al., 2019). Though he was not taken seriously by his colleagues at first, eventually researchers including Samuel Corson and Elizabeth O'Leary Corson observed similar interactions to what Levinson had observed (Fine et al., 2019). Levinson then became known as the "Father of Animal Assisted Therapy" (Fine et al., 2019). The field of AAT has morphed from having animals as companions in therapy sessions, to understanding that animals can have a profoundly positive impact on health in humans (Fine et al., 2019). This has led to animals being included in hospitals, schools, nursing homes, therapy settings to name a few (Ernst, 2014). As Fine et. al (2019), explains, "research into Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI) continues to evolve with research moving from elderly and children to specifically focusing on animals to support those with autism, anxiety, depression, trauma, PTSD, and other emerging health and economic challenges to society" (p.3).

Neurobiology of Dogs

For thousands of years, dogs and humans have cohabitated together with a reciprocal relationship between one another. Both enjoying one another's companionship, loyalty, and love. For this section, I will focus on the neurobiology of dogs, that they bring to their owners, and in turn, how humans can benefit from human-animal interaction (HAI).

Initially dogs were meant for a specific purpose, to provide food and clothing, but soon after, the health benefits of the human-animal bond, became more well known, and widespread (Beck & Katcher, 1996). Approximately 15,000 years ago, domestication of animals was first

introduced. These domesticated animals were used as “scavengers, objects of affection and worship, and food, with certain animals being considered noble and given status jobs like house guard and soldier” (Ernst, 2014, p.1). As mentioned above, the AAI field first was documented in late 1700’s, using rabbits and poultry, but it was Florence Nightingale who identified the positive impact domesticated animals had on the health of her patients. As Florence Nightingale explained “a pet is often an excellent companion for the sick, for the long chronic cases especially” (Nightingale, 1983, as cited in Oyama & Serpell, 2013, p.1). The positive health benefits were not only noticed in hospital and therapy settings, they also became well known with companion animals and their owners. Fine (2018) explained the following:

The companion animals may also physically calm their owners by reducing their blood pressure and heart rate and decreasing the levels of stress hormones such as cortisol. It is hypothesized that human interaction with animals through playing, petting or simply being in their company impacts on several hormones and neurotransmitters, including decreasing cortisol (de-stressing) as well as increasing serotonin, oxytocin and dopamine. Ironically, what has been sensationalized over the years as being a magical relationship is now being better understood scientifically and neurobiologically. (p. 142)

These feel-good neurotransmitters: oxytocin, serotonin, and dopamine, can be released upon a single meeting with dogs, but more frequent, longer relationships will be more beneficial and longer lasting due to the recurring oxytocin release (Beetz, 2012). These neurotransmitters work together to help calm the stress response, or fight/flight/freeze (Olf, 2012).

In addition to the neurotransmitters that are released, numerous studies have shown the physical and mental health benefits therapy dogs provide. “Therapy dogs affect individuals by decreasing heart rate and blood pressure, increasing overall well-being (i.e., reduced anxiety,

depression, and fear), improving behavior, lowering aggression and violence, and contributing to treatment compliance” (Nimber & Lundahl, 2007, as cited in Zents et. al, 2017, p.83).

Dogs are also nonjudgmental and provide a comfortable presence to a child who wants to communicate with them. “The capacity for domesticated dogs to read faces or nonverbal communication surpasses humans, as dogs possess heightened sensitivity to human endocrine output and nonverbal communication” (Guo, 2016, as cited in Hartwig & Pliske, 2023, p.147).

Social Emotional Curriculum

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is a vital part of BC’s Education Curriculum. With the redesigned curriculum, the Core Competencies are the building blocks to students learning social skills to prepare them for life in the real world. This includes focus in Communication, Thinking, and Personal and Social Communication (British Columbia Ministry of Education, n.d.) With these Core Competencies, it allows teachers to model lessons to help students gain skills in self-confidence, growth mindset, empathy, and problem solving, to name a few. The SEL curriculum enhances many tools of being a trauma informed classroom and school. According to Gimbert et al., 2023:

One commonality between these approaches is the importance of SEL skills, which serve as essential building blocks necessary for engaging in these initiatives. In fact, the Advancement Project specifically names SEL as an element of restorative practices and researchers suggest they support one another. While SEL serves as a centralizing component to many school initiatives, SEL standards in schools require intentionality in implementation so these skills can be explicitly taught, practiced, modeled, and weaved into daily school activities. (p. 28)

In many districts, classroom teachers are the ones to implement the SEL curriculum, but due to teachers being overworked, it often gets missed (Gimbert et al., 2023). In some districts, School Counsellors are universally targeting tier 1 students (all students/all settings) with whole class SEL lessons and then reinforcing these concepts in small groups with Tier 2 and individually with tier 3 students. Tier 2 and 3 students are those high-risk intensive students. Some of these programs include: MindUP, Second Step, Zones of Regulation, and Roots of Empathy. These are some of the ways that therapy dogs can be included to help teach the programs. They will be described fully below.

Integrating Therapy Dogs into the SEL Curriculum

The SEL curriculum in schools focuses on developing students' empathy, self-regulation, executive functioning, and social emotional skills. Depending on their background, many students with trauma may have a difficult time trusting adults or building strong connections and therefore, these skills can be difficult to learn. Therapy dogs can provide a trusting and accepting space for children to express their feelings (Zents et al., 2017). Therapy dogs also allow for modeling of social skills and behaviour (Yordy et al., 2020). An example of this would be through talking quiet, respecting a dog's space, and displaying compassion and empathy for one another (Yordy et al., 2020). Additionally, as Zents et. al (2017) explains, dogs provide a tactile sensory experience that is not common as much in schools anymore, especially following the Covid-19 pandemic. As explained in Grove et al. (2018), multiple studies have shown that therapy dogs reduce students anxiety, physiological symptoms, and increase overall wellbeing among students. Furthermore, in a 2013 study completed in Germany which compared a control class learning about SEL curriculum, and another 'dog-class' which contained a therapy dog once a week, Beetz (2013) concluded that not only did the therapy dogs presence reduce negative

attitude among certain students, but it also showed a benefit to the entire class. Beetz (2013) noted that the students in the dog-class significantly improved their overall wellbeing at school. This includes a positive attitude towards both learning and school in general. Comparatively, Beetz (2013), found that students in the control class experienced a decline in their attitudes towards learning.

Procedures and Policies of Therapy Dogs in Schools

The policies and procedures for having therapy dogs in schools varies from district to district in British Columbia. In some districts, therapy dogs are regular visitors to school classrooms and provide therapeutic benefits for students and staff. In others, therapy dogs are not yet being welcomed into schools for a variety of reasons, which I will touch on later. For this section, I will focus on the current procedures and policies of therapy dogs in several districts across British Columbia.

The Campbell River School District recently made changes to its policy surrounding therapy dogs in schools. This operational procedure is easily accessible on their webpage and is clearly broken down for all to read. It begins with a background behind the rationale to having therapy dogs in schools and identifies the benefits of using dogs in schools. “The presence of a therapy dog can decrease anxiety and provide a level of comfort that enables students to work through a variety of challenging issues. Their responsibilities are to provide psychological or physiological therapy to individuals other than their handlers” (Campbell River School District, 2021, p.1). Additionally, the operational procedure clearly explains that the therapy dog and handler must be certified by a therapy dog organization and must not interfere with students learning. Moreover, the district outlines the procedure for staff, students, and parents, on who to contact if they have any concerns or conflicts arise. Furthermore, it goes on to explain the roles

and responsibilities of the school district and school as well as how a therapy dog may be removed if the original intent is not being met, or if “aggression, allergies, accidents, or interference with teaching” occurs (Campbell River School District, 2021, p.2). The school district also provides staff with letters to the school community and letters to the families of the class the dog will be attending. Creating a district wide, comprehensive plan to having therapy dogs in schools, allows it to be transparent and minimizes the onus on teachers on how to implement the use of dogs.

Similarly, School District 68, Nanaimo/Ladysmith has amended their policy surrounding therapy dogs in schools, recognizing the benefits therapy dogs bring to students and staff. The new policy was met with some concern by some school district trustees but was passed after consultation with other districts (Nanaimo/Ladysmith Public Schools, 2020). The policy now outlines the application procedure, school district responsibilities, handler responsibilities, and guidelines for removal of dogs from the school (Nanaimo/Ladysmith Public Schools, 2020). However, this new policy does use the term ‘Assistance Dogs’ to encompass therapy dogs, autism support dogs, hearing dogs, service dogs, guide dogs, and seizure response dogs. As each of these types of dogs have different allowances and certifications, to use one term to encompass them all can cause confusion.

In some districts, it seems to be more up to individual schools as to their policies regarding therapy dogs in school. In School District 61 Greater Victoria, there is a district wide policy regarding classroom pets, but no specific reference to therapy dogs or dogs in schools. However, Hillcrest Elementary, a kindergarten-grade five school in SD 61, has brought in a therapy dog and handler for their ‘Paws and Tales’ reading program. Not only does the program help build children’s self-confidence in reading, but it “helps children gain awareness, empathy,

and sensitivity towards an animal as a partner in their learning and in exploring the world around them” (Greater Victoria School District 61, 2020, p.1). The information letter for students and parents explains the purpose of the program, information about the therapy dog used, certifications, and information about the handler. Without a district wide policy, it can be more difficult to include therapy dogs in schools, as if it is school dependent, the decision will be decided by school administration and their knowledge and comfort level.

While some districts like those above have been updating and amending their procedures and policies around therapy dogs, some districts do not have their current policies available for public view, or do not support the use of therapy dogs in the classroom or on school property. “As the presence of unauthorized animals on school property during school hours or at other times constitutes a threat to school property and to the safety of children or adults who may be engaged in school or other activities on school property, unauthorized animals are prohibited from school properties at all times” (Delta School District, 2013, p.1). This policy does not state what animals are considered authorized and therefore creates limits and confusion.

Barriers to Therapy Dogs in Schools

While there is significant evidence that the use of therapy dogs has many benefits, there are several barriers that must be considered and addressed. Safety is likely one of the first challenges to be explored. As some dog breeds can be more aggressive and territorial, which is often highlighted in the news and other media platforms, there is the obvious concern that children would be placed at risk of being bitten. Additionally, the mere presence of a dog, which might include behaviours such as staring, growling, or barking, could cause children some discomfort or, even worse, to feel scared or fearful; the latter would certainly appear if children also had previous traumatic interactions with dogs. These safety issues, and especially if a

physical bite were to occur, creates liability concerns and obligations for the school district; ensuring that adequate training/certification, insurance, and other controls are in place might be too onerous for school administration to take on.

Beyond the initial safety concerns, Grove et al., (2021) highlighted several others: hygiene/sanitation (e.g., dogs transmitting disease or infections), allergies (e.g., children having negative reactions to animal dander), cultural considerations (e.g., position that animals do not belong in an educational/social setting with many people), ethical issues (e.g., proper care, handling and use of dogs and other animals) and adequate funding and buy-in/support from schools. There are several ways to mitigate these concerns and risks, which will be explored in Chapter 3.

Interventions Used in Schools

Many school districts across British Columbia allow teacher autonomy when it comes to SEL programs. Because of this, students are exposed to a variety of programs that all have similar goals but may use different terminology to describe feelings and energy levels. I will explain the basics of the four of the most popular SEL programs I have come across during my ten years as a classroom teacher.

The MindUp SEL program was developed in 2003, by the educational foundation sponsored by actress Goldie Hawn. MindUp is “classroom program that provides a curriculum at the intersection of neuroscience, positive psychology, mindful awareness, and SEL” (The Hawn Foundation, 2011, p.3). MindUp is a preventative mental health program, that focuses on neuroscience and positive psychology, making it a very popular program among educators. MindUp is offered in three separate grade brackets, Pre-K-2, 3-5, and 6-8. Recently, the program has also created an at home link, so that families can mirror the language and lessons that have

been taught at school, in their homes. MindUp introduces students to mindfulness, mindful breathing, and brain breaks and has students engage in these activities several times a day. For educators, the program is laid out sequentially and needs little to no preparation time, so it can be easily implemented. MindUp is also a CASEL SElect program, indicating that it has been backed and supported by the non-profit organization, Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). I have personally not used this program, but it is one that I intend to attend training on in the future.

Second Step was created by Committee for Children, a non-profit organization that has been involved in the safety and wellbeing of children for over 40 years (Committee for Children, 2023). The Second Step program is based on a meta-analysis study of over 97, 500 students in 82 schools that identified the importance that SEL programs have on students over the course of their lives. Taylor et al. (2017) explained the results of the meta-analysis.

The study shows that 3.5 years after their last SEL intervention, students fared markedly better academically than their peers in control groups by an average of 13 percentile points, based on eight studies that measured academics. Additionally, researchers saw that conduct problems, emotional distress, and drug use were much lower for students with SEL exposure than those without. The study also indicates that—regardless of race, socioeconomic background, or school location—students showed significant positive benefits one-year post-intervention. This finding suggests that SEL interventions can support the positive development of students from diverse family backgrounds or geographical contexts. (p. 1166)

The Second Step program is sequential and comes with a variety of posters and other items at a developmentally appropriate level. For example, in the kindergarten lessons, students are

introduced to two puppets to learn about comfortable and uncomfortable feelings. As explained in the Second Step Elementary kit overview section, the program “helps teach kids skills that can help them in school, at work, and in life, such as listening, focusing attention, making friends, and problem-solving” (Committee for Children, 2023, p.1). As a teacher who has used this program in both my kindergarten and grade one classes, I can speak to the age-appropriate lesson material and vocabulary that my students learned throughout the course of the program.

The Zones of Regulation SEL program was developed in 2011 by Occupational Therapist and Autism resource teacher, Leah Kuypers (Think Social Publishing, 2023). Kuypers developed the program after observing how many students struggled with self-regulation and sensory regulation skills. The goal of the program is to help students recognize when they are becoming overwhelmed and take steps to manage these feelings in a healthy way. In the Zones of Regulation program, feelings, states of alertness, and energy, are grouped into four different colours to make it easier for students to relate to. The Zones of Regulation program can be adapted to suit a variety of learners of many different age groups. I have used this program for many years as a classroom teacher and have noticed a difference in my student’s ability to recognize their feelings and alertness.

The Roots of Empathy (ROE) program is what I loosely based the Paws for Empathy program model around. I have never taught the Roots of Empathy program, but I have researched a lot about it over the years. The Roots of Empathy program was created by Mary Gordon, a distinguished Canadian educator and well-known parenting expert. The vision of ROE is “To build caring, peaceful and civil societies through the development of empathy in children and adults” (Roots of Empathy, 2023, p.1). The ROE program consists of guided observations of

an infant that visits an elementary classroom each week. The ROE program is not publicly available online without having been properly trained by an ROE instructor.

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed the literature around therapy dogs in schools, a brief explanation of trauma and expanded on the neurobiology of dogs. I explained the connection between Attachment Theory, PCT, and AAT, and therapy dogs. Additionally, I discussed the importance of SEL programs in schools and some of the struggles that teachers are faced with regarding SEL programs. Finally, I explained some of the current policies and procedures in several BC school districts regarding therapy dogs in schools. I also expanded on some of the barriers that teachers, counsellors, and districts face when implementing therapy dogs in schools.

The research cited highlights how therapy dogs can be implemented successfully when specific protocols and parameters are put in place. Additionally, the positives that therapy dogs bring to children with and without trauma, outweigh any potential concerns. With the school system and mental health systems being stretched, it is vital we explore all possible avenues to help our students.

In chapter 3, I will include recommendations on how therapy dogs can be successfully integrated into school districts, as well as provide sample lessons on how an existing SEL program can be adapted to successfully integrate therapy dogs into the lessons.

Chapter 3: Summary, Recommendations and Conclusions

Summary of Findings

Throughout my research, it is evident that there is a need to have therapy dogs in schools and that through effective preplanning, any concerns can be limited and mitigated. My findings from reviewing the research indicate a strong need for alternative supports in our school system. Furthermore, multiple studies identified the need for students to have key attachment figures in their lives at school and this directly correlates to their sense of belonging and connection (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004; Lee & Huang, 2021; Rose et al., 2019). If students do not have these key attachment figures in place, students try to cope as best they can, oftentimes resulting in emotional dysregulation and social/peer conflicts. As outlined in my research, this is where therapy dogs can support these students. Therapy dogs can support students through direct tier 1 intervention with school counsellors, as well tier 3, classroom social emotional lesson instruction. The unconditional positive regard, non-judgemental approach, and loyalty that therapy dogs bring, can allow students a safe figure to attach to within the school.

Through reviewing the literature on therapy dogs, the main themes identified are the neurobiological benefits of therapy dogs on humans and the ongoing need for alternative mental health supports within the school system. As identified in a variety of settings, the benefits of the HAI far outweigh any risks. In an already stretched and overworked system, the addition of therapy dogs can bring a wealth of support for those students that are struggling to feel connected, especially those students dealing with the effects of trauma. Through the integration of therapy dogs in social emotional learning programs, students can learn to self-regulate, increase their understanding of social skills, and feel more secure during their time at school.

It is vital that students learn how to self-regulate, experience healthy connection and belonging to positive attachment figures, and build their resiliency skills during their time in school. As explained above, the pressures on both the mental health and school systems cannot provide all students with these skills, so it is vital districts explore all possible avenues to help students succeed. The addition of a therapy dog in schools allow those students that may have a hard time fitting into the rigor of a 'typical' classroom, the ability to feel success through leadership, responsibility and belonging. As a classroom teacher, I can foresee how allowing a student the responsibility of taking the therapy dog for a walk outside with an adult and bringing them a treat brings a positive and meaningful connection to the student, as opposed for sending them out of the classroom for a break, only to return oftentimes still dysregulated. Given these opportunities, it is my hope that students can develop these skills and begin to implement them in their daily lives.

Recommendations

Throughout the various studies and research, I reviewed, it was apparent that SEL in schools is extremely important. In my experience as a classroom teacher, it is often those students that need SEL the most, that are out of the room for a variety of reasons. This can be due to inability to self-regulate, behavioural outbursts, or lack of boundaries with their peers. It is my recommendation that using therapy dogs to increase SEL understanding, would incorporate a more concrete kinesthetic teaching model.

Purpose

The purpose of this program is to support students within the classroom setting by providing an adapted SEL program aided by the use of therapy dogs. I provide an adapted version of the Second Step Social-Emotional program for students in kindergarten-grade three.

My goal is to provide educators with a sample of how SEL programs can be adapted to include therapy dogs in the classroom through easy to implement lessons that teachers and counsellors can implement into their schools. While many educators may have an interest in having therapy dogs in the classroom, the actual implementation of this can be daunting. It is my goal to remove some of the barriers and provide a snapshot into how this can be successfully accomplished.

Learning Objectives

I chose to name my program, 'Paws for Empathy' to recognize the relationship between canines and their undeniable empathy for their humans. Additionally, I thought it was fitting because the organizational structure of my program is loosely based off of the Roots of Empathy program. This SEL program, named 'Paws for Empathy' is suited for kindergarten-grade 3 classes and takes in the classroom as part of a tier 3 intervention model. However, skills taught can be reinforced throughout the week. The therapy dog assisted portion consists of one 30-minute session per week. Classroom teachers can teach the program and utilize a therapy dog team from a community organization such as St. John's Ambulance or PADS, or if there is a therapy dog already trained within the school, the dog and its handler can attend as well. The program can also be co-taught with the school counsellor if the classroom teacher is uncomfortable. It is important to note that the therapy dog handler cannot be the one to run the lesson, as their responsibility is to the therapy dog and safety. Although the focus of the program is to support students with trauma, the skills and lessons can help all students learn self-regulation, empathy, and social skills. The lessons will meet the following curricular competencies for Careers and Physical Health and Education for kindergarten-grade 3 in British Columbia:

- Recognize the importance of positive relationships in their lives.

- Share ideas, information, personal feelings, and knowledge with others.
- Work respectfully and constructively with others to achieve common goals.
- Identify and describe feelings and worries.
- Learning about ourselves and others helps us develop a positive attitude and caring behaviours, which helps us build healthy relationships.
- Develop and demonstrate respectful behaviour when participating in activities with others.
- Identify caring behaviours among classmates and within families.

Program Overview

The ‘Paws for Empathy’ program is loosely based off the Second Step Social Emotional Learning program objectives and the format is based off the Roots of Empathy program model described in chapter 2. These two programs are both well known worldwide as pillars of SEL programming in schools.

For the Paws for Empathy program, I adopted the ROE program model, which groups lessons into three parts: pre-family visit, family visit, post-family visit. I think this structure allows for rich discussion, outlines safety for all involved, and allows students the opportunity to gradually begin to shift their perspective and engage in emotional literacy language.

Considerations

Prior to the therapy dog joining in the classroom, it is imperative that steps are taken to teach students in the classroom, and the greater school community about appropriate etiquette and interaction around the therapy dog. This ensures safety for the students, the therapy dog, and other students in the school. A total of five ‘pre-therapy dog’ lessons will take place which will allow the therapy dog handler to outline appropriate interactions with the therapy dog and gives

the students a chance to meet the therapy dog handler. The handler will read the students a story about their specific therapy dog and tell them a little bit about themselves. This allows students to create a connection with the handler and creates some excitement about the dog's first visit. It also allows time for the classroom teacher to inform parents about the role of the therapy dog in the classroom and for permission forms to be sent home (see Appendix A). This is also where classroom teachers and administration can address any potential parent or family concerns regarding allergies, cultural considerations, and fear of dogs. The therapy dog will stay contained in one classroom or office, depending on the need, and those students with allergies or a fear of dogs can either view from a distance or have an alternate activity planned for them. Schools can also hold information nights where information is shared about the purpose and research behind the incorporation of therapy dogs into the school.

Another consideration is that those students that are targeted tier 1 students will most likely need reinforcement of the program in smaller groups or on an individual basis. It is important to note, that depending on the therapy dog and handler, it may be that the school counsellor can illicit the use of the therapy dog in these situations to strengthen the connection and bond for the student. This will be school and handler dependent.

It is imperative that safety is a priority, not only for the students and staff, but also for the therapy dog. It is the handler's responsibility to respond to the therapy dogs needs and adjust accordingly. A designated relief area must be discussed with school administration prior to the dog entering the school, and safety procedures regarding fire drills, medical situations, etc. should also be reviewed with the handler.

It is my recommendation that school districts only use therapy dogs that have been certified by designated organizations. These organizations screen both the handler and therapy

dog through an evaluation process, as well as complete background checks and have liability insurance. Having been through the evaluation process with my own therapy dog, Audi, I can attest to the rigorous and thorough testing that takes place. Therapy dog certification programs also have a set of policies regarding keeping vaccinations up to date, keeping the dog well groomed, a uniform for the therapy dog and handler, and restrictions on the type of food the dog is allowed to eat. Some of these certification programs include St. John's Ambulance Therapy Dogs, Pacific Animal Therapy Society, and Sunshine Therapy Dogs. It is imperative that school districts also purchase their own liability insurance to protect themselves from any potential litigation.

Practical Considerations and Strategies

The Paws for Empathy program will be broken into two separate parts. The first set of five lessons are the pre-therapy dog visits (see Appendix E). The next set of lessons include the therapy dog and focus on aspects of SEL (See Appendix F). I will expand on these below.

Prior to the therapy dog and therapy dog working in the school, school administration will inform school staff of the days the therapy dog will be in the school and address any concerns school staff may have at a staff meeting.

Part one will focus on five pre-therapy dog lessons which include the therapy dog handler (see Appendix E). The purpose of these lessons is to build rapport between the therapy dog handler and the students and establish a safe and welcoming environment for when the therapy dog joins the class. Prior to the first lesson, a letter will be sent home to the class in which the therapy dog will be working in (see Appendix A), and the entire school community (see Appendix C). These lessons will focus on introducing the therapy dog and therapy dog handler and explain protocols and appropriate etiquette when engaging with the therapy dog. The therapy

dog handler will also read a story telling the students a little bit about their specific therapy dog and the purpose behind their visit. Themes for these first five lessons include: comfortable/uncomfortable feelings, empathy, and caring behaviours.

Part two will encompass three larger units, each containing a SEL theme and a set of three lessons each (see Appendix D). These lessons will be taught while the therapy dog and therapy dog handler are present. Throughout the week, the classroom teacher can reinforce the lesson objectives. While the therapy dog is on school premises, a sign will be posted (see Appendix B) on school doors and throughout the school to indicate there is a therapy dog working in the school. The themes for these three units will focus on: identifying feelings in our bodies, empathy, problem solving, and being part of a group.

Limitations to this Capstone

While I endeavored to review as much of the research surrounding therapy dogs, social emotional learning, and trauma, I am cognizant that the studies surrounding therapy dogs and SEL specifically in schools is more limited. Many of the studies that I reviewed discussed the use of therapy dogs as a form of direct AAT with a counsellor or using therapy dogs to support academics in schools. Another limitation I encountered is that many of the studies focused on therapy dogs in the United States, rather than Canada. The school system and supports in both countries vary greatly.

Additionally, as discussed in my statement of positionality, I acknowledge that I have tried to be an impartial as possible, but I do have somewhat of a bias towards therapy dogs, as I am a therapy dog handler myself. This is important to be aware of when conducting any research and cannot be overlooked.

The third limitation that I am cognizant of, is my familiarity with SEL programs. I have used the Second Step program as a classroom teacher and my students enjoyed it, so therefore I decided to use this program as my base model. I am aware that there are various other SEL programs available to counsellors and students but chose to use one I am most familiar with, and have used in my own classroom. Further research is needed to determine if other SEL programs can be successfully adapted.

Conclusions

In this capstone, I described how using therapy dogs in schools as an alternative therapeutic means, could allow students to experience safety within their own body, something that can be difficult for students with trauma. With proper planning and implementation, therapy dogs can be a vital opportunity for students to learn SEL skills and experience success. As Fine et al. (2019), explains, “Animal-assisted interventions should not be considered as a panacea, but should be considered as a valuable life opportunity that can make a difference” (p.2).

I believe that while therapy dogs are not a ‘cure-all’, I do believe they are a step in the right direction. It is evident mental health concerns in both schools and the community are growing every day, and it is our duty to do all we can to find alternatives to traditional therapy models. The research surrounding therapy dog programs and SEL integration is more limited, but through the establishment of programs within our schools, we can begin to collect data to further interest.

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Appendix A

THERAPY DOG IN SCHOOL - SAMPLE LETTER TO THE FAMILIES OF CHILDREN IN THE CLASS(ES)¹

(SCHOOL LETTERHEAD)

Date Dear Parent/Guardian:

This letter is to inform you that, effective (date), there will be a therapy dog in our school assisting our students, and the therapy dog will be present in your child's class.

Therapy dogs are interactive dogs trained to work for a Handler to provide service and comfort to people. The presence of a therapy dog can decrease anxiety and provide a level of comfort that enables students to work through a variety of challenging issues.

(Name of dog) is a highly trained and fully certified therapy dog, and we are thrilled to have (him/her) become a member of our school community. If you have any questions about (name of dog), please feel free to contact me.

There will be information sessions at the school to integrate (name of dog) into our daily routines and all our staff and students will be instructed as to the proper procedures regarding the therapy dog.

If you have any specific concerns regarding the presence of the therapy dog in your child's class, please contact me.

Thank you for your understanding, support, and interest.

Sincerely,

Principal

c: Superintendent of Schools

¹ Campbell River School District, 2023

Appendix B



NOTICE:

**THERE IS A WORKING THERAPY
DOG IN THIS SCHOOL TODAY.**



Appendix B: Showing Sample Working Therapy Dog Sign

Appendix C

THERAPY DOG IN SCHOOL - SAMPLE LETTER TO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY²

(SCHOOL LETTERHEAD)

Date Dear Parent/Guardian:

This letter is to inform you that, effective (date), there will be a therapy dog in our school.

The dog will be in the school (times/days). Dates and times may change as required without further notice.

Therapy dogs are interactive dogs trained to work for a Handler to provide service and comfort to people. The presence of a therapy dog can decrease anxiety and provide a level of comfort that enables students to work through a variety of challenging issues.

(Name of dog) is a highly trained and fully certified therapy dog, and we are thrilled to have (him/her) become a member of our school community. If you have any questions about (name of dog), please feel free to contact me.

There will be information sessions at the school to integrate (name of dog) into our daily routines and all our staff and students will be instructed as to the proper procedures regarding the therapy dog.

If you have any specific concerns regarding the presence of the therapy dog in the school, please contact me.

Thank you for your understanding, support, and interest.

Sincerely,

Principal

c: Superintendent of Schools

² Campbell River School District, 2023

Appendix D

Paws for Empathy SEL Adapted Program for K-3

Part 1- Pre-Therapy Dog Visit- Set of 5 Lessons

Lesson # and Theme	Lesson Objectives	Lesson Overview
1. Introduction to Therapy Dog Handler	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding role of therapy dog handler and building rapport with students. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Welcome</i>. Introduction by classroom teacher. <i>Discussion</i>- Therapy Dog Handler will introduce themselves and discuss their role. <i>Activity</i>- Handler will read ‘Madeline Finn and the Therapy Dog’. <i>Discussion</i>- Class discussion- How do therapy dog handlers help people?
2. Overview of Therapy Dog Role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognizing difference between therapy dog, service dog, and companion animals. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Welcome</i>- Review from previous lesson. Reintroduction of Handler. <i>Discussion</i>- Outline difference between therapy, dog, service dog, and companion dog. <i>Activity</i>- how are they the same? How are they different? <i>Activity</i>- Complete picture sort.
3. Therapy Dog Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Therapy Dog program overview. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Welcome</i>- Review previous lesson. <i>Discussion</i>-Handler will introduce therapy dog through pictures and videos. <i>Discussion</i>-Handler will show some pictures of the therapy dog’s favourite things (toys, etc.). <i>Activity</i>- Handler will read ‘Albus the Aussie and the day as a Therapy Dog’ <i>Check out</i>- Complete “how are you feeling?” (see Appendix E). This will gauge how students are feeling about the therapy dog’s upcoming visit. It also allows for open communication with parents and guardians.
4. Dog Detectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognizing body language in dogs. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Welcome</i>- Review of previous lesson. <i>Activity</i>- Introduction of Second Step dog puppet. Use puppet to show difference of body language in a dog. Examples include: angry, happy, silly, sad, scared. etc. <i>Activity</i>- Show video ‘Bite Free- SPCA’ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2Rh4k5ri74 <i>Discussion</i>- How should we approach a dog? Can we pet all dogs?

5. Therapy Dog Etiquette	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introducing safety protocols. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Welcome.</i> Review of previous lesson. <i>Discussion and Activity-</i> Handler and classroom teacher will outline expectations surrounding when the therapy dog will visit. This can include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Washing hands before and after touching dog -Walking feet -Refraining from giving dog food -How to approach a dog -Dog must be always leashed. <i>Activity-</i> Handler or classroom teacher will read, “May I Pet Your Dog” <i>Discussion-</i> Outline expectations for next lesson.
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Part 2- Therapy Dog Visits

Lesson themes and objectives from the Second Step Emotional Learning Program. Lessons have been adapted to include Therapy Dog participation.

Unit 1- Feelings

Lesson # and Theme	Second Step Lesson Objectives ³	Therapy Dog Adaptation
1. Feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> People can have different feelings about the same situation. People’s feelings can change. <i>Empathy</i> is feeling or understanding what someone else is feeling. 	<p>Use therapy dog to show examples of dog body language. Ex: a ball is thrown -> dog is excited a loud sudden noise -> dog is scared Discussion points: How can we show empathy to our friends? How can we show empathy to animals? Do animals and humans have similar feelings? How are they the same? How are they different?</p>
2. Identifying Feelings in Our Bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying your own feelings helps you know how others feel. Everyone experiences strong feelings sometimes. 	<p>Dogs have feelings just like humans do. How might our therapy dog be feeling before coming to our class? Scared, worried, excited? Dogs have ways of coping just like people do.</p>

³ Committee for Children, 2023

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some feelings are comfortable, and some are uncomfortable. Physical clues can help you identify others' feelings. 	<p>Show example of dog shaking after playing. See video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSUbU3pT4E This is a way to 'shake it off'.</p> <p>What clues can we use to find out how dogs are feeling? How does that relate to humans?</p>
3. Calming Down Strong Feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Belly breathing calms down strong feelings. Belly breathing pushes the belly out when you breathe in. Being mean or hurting others when you are angry is not okay. 	<p>Demonstrate deep breathing. What are things that you use to help you calm down? -Going for walks, deep breathing, having space, reading a book, colouring.</p> <p>How can dogs calm down? Review shake it off. If we are frustrated, how can we help ourselves? The focus of this lesson is to have the therapy dog demonstrate calming behaviours, and use the therapy dog to help students calm down.</p>

Unit 2- Empathy

Lesson #	Lesson Objectives	Lesson Overview with Therapy Dog Inclusion
1. Looking for Clues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Situational clues can help you identify others' feelings. Understanding how others feel improves relationships. 	<p>Using therapy dog, what clues can we use about how they are feeling? Look at tail position, eyes, facial features, muzzle, etc.</p> <p>How might we approach the therapy dog if we want to spend time together? Demonstrate calm approach and dog's reaction. Demonstrate loud approach and dog's reaction.</p>
2. Showing Care and Concern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Compassion</i> is empathy in action. People feel better when others show them care and concern. 	<p>Use classroom volunteers to help bake oatmeal dog biscuits. How can doing something kind for someone make them feel?</p> <p>Donate the leftovers to local humane society.</p>
3. Respecting Different Perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Having empathy helps you notice when others have different preferences than you do. Respecting different preferences helps you get along better with others. 	<p>Explain differences between dogs and cats. What are key features about dogs and cats? How are they alike? How are they different? What are things cats like, that dogs do not, and vice versa?</p>

Unit 3- Problem Solving

Lesson #	Lesson Objectives	Lesson Overview with Therapy Dog Inclusion
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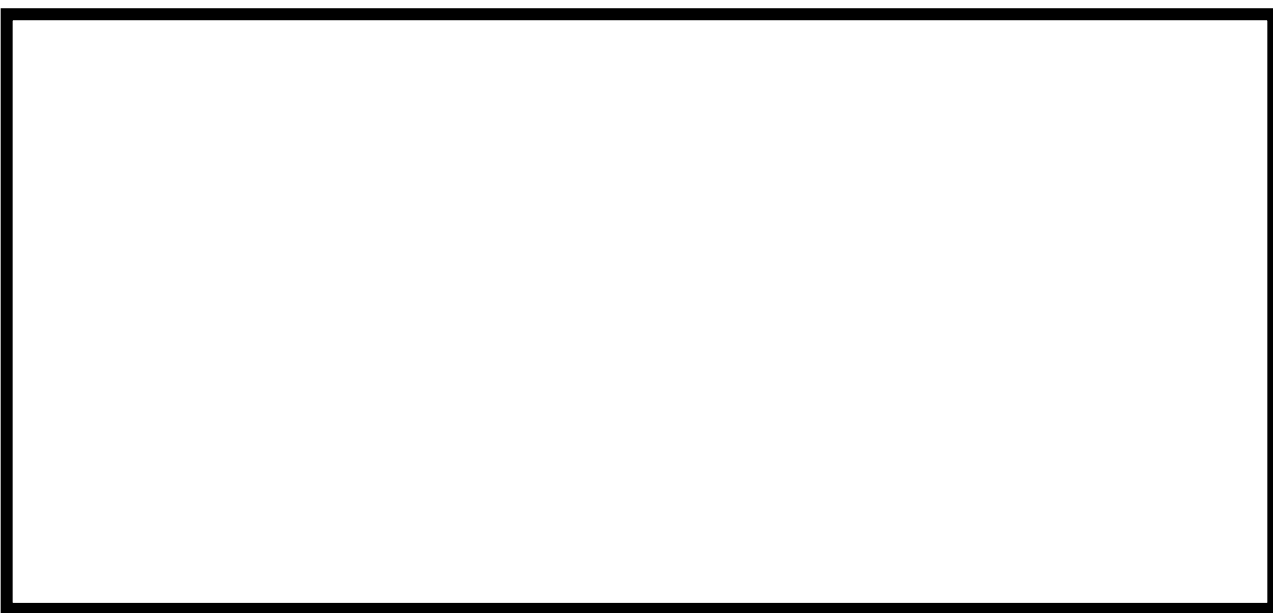
<p>1. Solving Problems/Fair Ways to Play</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calming down helps you think so you can solve problems. • Following steps can help you solve problems. • Saying the problem without blame is respectful. • Following steps can help you solve problems. • Solutions to problems must be safe and respectful. 	<p>Teach the Problem Solving Steps⁴. S: (Say the problem). T: (Think of solutions). E: (Explore consequences). P: (Pick the best solution). What do the first letters of each step spell? (STEP.) Remembering the word “step,” S-T-E-P, will help you remember the Problem-Solving Steps.</p> <p>How might two dogs that are arguing solve a problem? Use Second Step puppets to reenact a scenario. Draw pictures on paper pawprints about peaceful ways to solve problems and display them on a bulletin board with the title ‘PAWS Forward’.</p>
<p>2. Inviting to Play</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is important to notice and have empathy for children who are left out of play. • Inviting others to play is the right thing to do. • Playing with others is a way to get to know them better. 	<p>How might someone that is alone be feeling? Have therapy dog in one area and invite students to calmly bring a ball or treat and invite the dog over. Incorporate the therapy dog into the dramatic play centre by having a therapy dog corner or calm down corner.</p>
<p>3. Having Fun with Our Friends</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When children play in fair ways, everyone has fun. • Other children sometimes have different wants or preferences. • Choosing to have fun with others rather than get your own way helps you be friends. 	<p>Play a game outside with the therapy dog. Invite the dog into the classroom during centres.</p> <p>Add to the PAWS Forward bulletin board paper dog bones about ways children play together.</p>

⁴ Committee for Children, 2023







Appendix E

Therapy Dog Check In: Pre-Visit

Name: _____



Before our therapy dog visits, I am feeling _____.

I feel safe around dogs.			
I know how to greet a dog.			
I understand the therapy dog's job.	