

**Perceptions of Junior High Students of Animal-Assisted Interventions for School
Connectedness and School Climate**

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Abstract

A growing body of research recognizes animal-assisted interventions (AAI) for increased benefits to students in a range of emotional and psychological needs. In this grounded theory study, researchers investigated students' experiences of AAI framed by the American School Counseling Association (2014) Mindset & Behavior Standards. Results revealed wellness factors for a collective sense of ownership and school climate. Implications include use of AAI as a strength-based approach within a Response to Intervention framework.

Keywords: Student connectedness, mindsets, school counseling, student wellness, animal-assisted interventions, animal assisted therapy, response to intervention

Perceptions of Junior High Students of Animal-Assisted Interventions for School Connectedness and School Climate

Research conducted over two decades has suggested that school connectedness and a sense of belonging is foundational for many youth in reducing risk-taking behaviors and improving academic motivation and engagement (Search Institute, 2010.). The Association for School Counseling (ASCA) put forth ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success (ASCA, 2014), which are 35 standards, six of which are directly categorized as mindset standards: (a) belief in development of whole self, including a healthy balance of mental, social/emotional, and physical well-being; (b) self-confidence in ability to succeed; (c) sense of belonging in the school environment; (d) understanding that postsecondary education and life-long learning are necessary for long-term career success; (e) belief in using abilities to their fullest to achieve high-quality results and outcomes; and (f) positive attitude toward work and learning. Similarly, the Search Institute (2010) has linked motivational aspirations of youth as *sparks* for “intrinsic interests, talents, and passions that young people have that motivate them to learn, grow, and contribute” with attributes of confidence, skills, opportunities, and relationships. It is clear that positive youth development is dependent upon multiple non-cognitive factors that also facilitate academic performance.

School leaders are responding to the call to initiate inventive ways for reaching students and enhance school climate to enhance personal potential, motivation, a sense of connectedness and self-direction (ASCA, 2012b). One such creative strategy that has a growing body of research in the school setting is the use of animals such as

therapy dogs—trained animals that provide affection and comfort for a sense of overall well-being (Science Daily, n.d.) and the use of Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI).

Review of the Literature

Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI)

Cirulli et al. (2011) addressed the human-animal bond noting that for the most part, companion animals represent an emotional type of support and comfort as well as a companion. These authors explained that a growing number of studies on AAI about people interacting with dog that are not owned by themselves provides positive outcomes for improving physical, psychological, and social conditions. Parish-Plass (2008) posited how dogs, particularly, provide a calming effect for children in a non-judgmental or non-threatening way through the use of AAI. As such, children can be less anxious when interacting with therapy dogs prompting them to better engage with peers, adults, and in the classroom (Cirulli, 2011).

As Serpell et al. (2017) point out the challenges to research on animal-assisted interventions, it is important to recognize that a growing number of studies about the impact of AAI to bonding and social support can be mediated by a neuropeptide hormone oxytocin (OT), when activates the dopamine reward system. This process continues to be studied using multiple measures to understand how OT interacts with stress response systems for reducing stress (Serpell et al., 2017).

Connectedness and School Climate

Authors of The Education Trust outline five domains for a counseling program: (a) leadership, (b) advocacy for experiences, (c) collaboration to assist students, (d) counseling and coordination, and (e) assessment to impact school-wide change. Researchers in the field of mentoring have established that addressing struggling

students at an early age impact a more successful result of connectedness and success. The Search Institute (2009) encouraged school leaders to initiate interventions to help increase self-esteem and school connectedness. Concomitantly, the National School Climate Center (2014) has attributed a positive school climate to interpersonal relationships for influencing academic achievement and social/emotional youth development. As such, research in this area situates connectedness (i.e., a sense of belonging) as an extension of personal values (Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling, 2009) for a greater emphasis on what Dobmeier (2011) deemed as *spirituality* in student development. A positive school climate can be likened to the Adlerian concept of social interest, or a sense of being in the work that is evidenced by feeling useful when dealing with others (Kronemyer, 2009).

Shelton, Leeman, and O'Hara (2011) defined animal assisted therapy in counseling (AAT-C) as "the incorporation of pets as therapeutic agents into the counseling process" and delineated the importance of utilizing AAT-C as an intentional intervention (p. 1). Further, Shelton et al. (2011) explained the process of the special training and evaluation of an animal to include socialization, touch desensitization, and basic obedience as part of ethical standards. Particular to evaluation of suitable temperament and training quality, organizations such as American Kennel Club, Therapy Dogs International, and Delta Society/Pet Partners provide support, rigorous evaluation, and certification of both the person handling the therapy pet as a team for quality of care (Shelton et al., 2011). Periodic re-evaluation of the pet therapy team is inclusive of initial certification factors as well as veterinary care and maintenance of training for working with people in order for the team to be recertified.

Over a decade ago, Chandler (2001) distinguished how schools might benefit from the use of AAI for both therapeutic and educational goals. In addition, VanFleet (2007) outlined the therapeutic goals of AAI to include attachment/relationship-building/trust-building, increasing feelings of acceptance/feeling special, developing empathy and kindness, to name a few.

In addition, the primary researcher was the handler of the dogs and the science instructor for the 22 students engaged in the research process. Therefore, these researchers served as one of the primary research instruments that is important in qualitative research. The ongoing collection of data and continued classroom discussions surrounding the information served as member-checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), in that previously collected data were inspected to ensure the intended intentions of participants.

Conceptual Framework

Although AAI has much evidence for addressing therapeutic goals—as well as ASCA mindsets—few schools have implemented this type of systemic school-wide intervention. Based on the ways in which mentoring (i.e., using a dyadic relationship for positive benefits) has impacted enriched student connectedness, the purpose of this study was to explore perceptions/impressions of students with respect to AAI as a school-wide intervention. The conceptual framework for this study was the ASCA (2014) Mindsets Standards which focuses on increased awareness, connectedness, and positive school climate. A second purpose of this study was to engage students as co-researchers within the framework of the ASCA (2014) Behavior Standards as part of a *Critical Dialectical Pluralism* research stance (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2013) to empower participants beyond the findings of the study in recognizing perceptions of AAI in their

school. This stance recognizes the importance for participants to exercise control over the research decisions made during the research process as it also aligns with the Behavior Standards (ASCA, 2014) in all three domains: (a) learning strategies, self-management skills, and social skills.

To this end, researchers hoped to bring insight and awareness as a type of formative assessment to student participants and stakeholders alike for using AAI. Invariably, the ASCA Behavior Standards (2014) might be facilitated/assessed by engaging student co-researchers as a means to: (a) demonstrate critical-thinking skills to make informed decisions; (b) apply media and technology skills; (c) actively engage in challenging coursework; (d) gather evidence and consider multiple perspectives to make informed decisions. Therefore, to utilize student voices as well as empower them in the research process as co-researchers, the epistemological approach integrated social constructionism in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Researchers and student co-researchers implemented this school-wide study to explore AAI with a social justice lens toward “attentiveness to ideas and actions concerning fairness, equity, equality, democratic process, status, hierarchy, individual and collective rights, and obligations” (Charmaz, 2005, p. 510).

Research Questions

Research questions were addressed as follows:

1. What are the perceptions of students with respect to effects of AAI?
2. In what ways, if any, does AAI impact student connectedness and/or wellness?

Method

Participants and Setting

The school participating in this study was a large middle school in a large 5A district in rural Southeast Texas. Each year, they implement goals based on a campus needs assessment. The ASCA (2012a) vision for school counseling programs promotes that school counselors align a comprehensive plan with the school mission and vision each year. At the time of this study, the district and the campus focused their efforts toward improving school and classroom environment and culture based on the Center for Educational Leadership (2014) and they coordinated this vision using Safe and Civil Schools (Safe and Civil Schools, n.d.) for: (a) implementing school-wide positive behavior support for respect and responsibility and to improve school climate and culture; (b) implementing school-wide support for response-to-intervention for behavior; and (c) design and implement a better school improvement plan.

Ethnic distribution of students ($N = 1037$) of the campus participating in this study was approximately 65% White, 30% Hispanic, 2% Multi Race, 2% African American, and 1% other. Teacher ethnicity for this campus comprised approximately 90% White, 8% Hispanic, and 2% other. As part of an ongoing support system for students, the school leaders of the Junior High campus participating in this study, initiated AAI in 2012. At the time of this study, the AAI team had been part of the school environment for approximately 2 years and comprised of the handler, who was a science instructor and co-researcher with two certified dogs—Josie and Hank. Josie, a 4-year-old female Golden Retriever who was formerly a show dog, presents an amenable nature. Hank, a 9-year-old male Australian Shepherd Award of Merit recipient, has been recognized and titled by the AKC and the Australian Shepherd Club of America and in agility, herding,

and Rally-Obedience. The AAI handler with both Hank and Josie is a registered member of Intermountain Therapy Animals and underwent therapy dog team evaluations. Josie, Hank, and the handler are members of a local affiliate group of Intermountain Therapy Animals and the participating school was designated as an official visit site.

Josie was introduced to the school as a partner with the handler and visited the junior high school on a weekly basis, greeting students as they entered the building in the mornings, standing in the hallway between classes, and visiting Life Skills students in a small group setting. Further, due to the fact that the handler was also a Grade-7 science instructor, Josie spent a majority of time in the classroom for regular science instruction. After approximately 1 year, the handler recognized how eagerly the administration, staff, and students responded to Josie's presence and initiated work with Hank. As a result, both Josie and Hank became honorary employees of the district and the handler alternated AAI with the two of them.

Data Collection Procedures

After approval was obtained by the district/campus administrators and the institutional review board of the primary researchers' university, data were collected in the form of writing samples as a response to the morning routine of engaging in a school-wide virtual assembly featuring Josie and Hank. Students ($n = 566$) created the writing sample in their 7th grade language arts classes. The writing prompts were selected by the administrators of the school and comprised: (a) What difference does Josie or Hank make for you personally? (b) How has Josie or Hank helped you get through your day? (c) Some people say that Josie and Hank make them feel better. What does that mean? Why does this matter here at school?

Basic qualitative research processes were taught to selected students in a grade 7 and 8 gifted elective class, with tenets specific to grounded theory. "Grounded theory guidelines describe the steps of the research process and provide a path through it. Researchers can adopt and adapt them to conduct diverse studies ... I view grounded theory methods as a set of principles and practices, not as prescriptions or packages" (Charmaz, 2006 p. 9). Konecki (2011) posited that the inclusion of visual data in grounded theory contributes to the theoretical sampling for generating particular properties of the categories and can lead to visual cues, especially for examining interactions between humans and pets. As noted by Glaser (1992), data include whatever works for helping a researcher to generate theory, which can be archive documents, newspapers, researcher activities (Charmaz, 2006), and so forth.

The hand-written responses were collected from students' classroom teachers, given anonymity, and sorted. In this sorting process, representative writing samples ($n = 140$) were selected based on one or more of the following criteria: (a) response included a personal message describing a personal or collective benefit of knowing Josie and/or Hank; (b) response included a meaningful experience pertaining to Josie and/or Hank; (c) response included one or more ideas relating to wellness or school climate. As such, participants represented a purposeful sample, strategy termed by Merriam (2009) as nonprobability sampling, and what Patton (2002) described as a practical selection of participants for information-rich cases. The researchers were cognizant in the selection of samples whereby they represented a typical case sample (Patton, 2002) that was not in any major way atypical, extreme, deviant, or intensely unusual.

Analysis

Aligned with our Critical Dialectical Pluralism research stance (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2013), the co-researchers were grade 7 and 8 students who helped facilitate subsequent phases in grounded theory data collection/analysis process. Their roles as researchers included collecting additional artifacts from students, teachers, and parents in the form of emails, pictures, observations, and letters. All artifacts were coded with the goal of creating final themes so that the findings reflected key characteristics of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967): (a) the new theory connects to the real-world via data; (b) the theory provides understanding of the phenomenon; (c) the theory can create forward thinking and have some generality; and (d) the theory contributes to some control of the phenomenon for practical applications. Within this stance, we recognize what Charmaz (2005) referred to as “silences” (p. 527), or what students did not say about wellness and AAI, so that we might attend to new possibilities to understand and to provide usefulness to findings.

In the effort to establish a critical dialectical approach (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2013) whereby students become co-researchers, the use of virtual conferencing (i.e., Adobe Connect) with a co-researcher focused on methodological considerations and dialogue to establish the central research questions and any subsequent data collection points. In these meetings, students discussed initial hunches and impressions of AAI with Josie and Hank. In subsequent sessions, student co-researchers were introduced to the data analysis techniques for a grounded study approach and qualitative data analysis software. In the final sessions, co-researcher students discussed the preliminary findings and any new potential questions that resulted. Alongside the researchers, they created the themes that emerged from the coding of the writing

samples and other artifacts. They also created a plan to disseminate implications and further actions as a result of the findings. Data were analyzed using the QDA Miner 4.0 software program (Provalis Research, 2009).

After the coding of the language arts writing samples, the artifacts of teachers were coded by the researcher in the final stages of the grounded theory process to increase interpretations and meanings so that the final themes would reflect a practical representation of theory using concepts that are familiar to junior high students. As recommended by Glaser (1992), memos were created so that researchers could better immerse in the data collection/analysis and to attend to the four critical points outlined by Charmaz (2005): (a) theorizing as activity; (b) reaching avenues to expand the activity; (c) unfolding interests for shaping the content of the activity that is not the method; and (d) theorizing and reflecting on ways of acting on emergent points.

Trustworthiness

With respect to triangulating data, we reviewed the work of Patton (2002), who put forth that credibility is foundational to the integrity of the researcher. Therefore, in the data analysis process, we looked “*for data that support alternative explanations*” (Patton, 2002, p. 553; emphasis in original). As such, Patton’s (2002) *Ethical Issues Checklist* was the framework to provide ethical guidelines: (a) explaining reasons for inquiry and methods, (b) recognizing words to others with reciprocity, (c) evaluating risks, (d) respecting confidentiality, (e) obtaining informed consent and assent from school students and other involved parties, (f) valuing data access and ownership, (g) being aware of researchers’ mental health, (h) consulting others, (i) recognizing data collection barriers and boundaries, and (j) maintaining ethical or legal codes of conduct. Further, as a means of assessing inter-rater reliability or inter-coder agreement, the

primary researchers independently the responses and agreed 94.7% of the time. All discrepancies at the time of coding. In addition, to increase theoretical validity, or the degree to which the theory of findings fit the data collected (Maxwell, 1992), multiple potential explanations were sought to reduce reactivity, or the chance that the participants might have been overly aware of participation (Onwuegbuzie, 2003). Throughout the research process, we utilized debriefing interviews designed to bring initial hunches to the foreground for addressing researcher bias (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2008).

Results

Results from Open Coding

Not surprisingly, it was revealed that the most positive relationships could be attributed to students who reached out to the handler requesting increased time with Josie and/or Hank. With respect to characteristics of students who tended to gravitate most often to the dogs, data revealed that in some way, these students did not appear to be *fitting in* with natural social groups and/or friendships, or these students were identified to be experiencing some type of adjustment period at home (e.g., divorce, death of a loved one, recent move). Overall, a substantial difference was apparent between students who were in Grade 7 versus Grade 8 with respect to emotional descriptions of AAI and a deeper connectedness. This difference was attributed to two variables. First, the developmental needs and emotional maturity factors associated with Grade 8 students, who ranged from age 13 to age 14, were very different from those of Grade 7 students who ranged from age 12 to age 13. Second, researchers determined that a more extended relationship with Josie and/or Hank (due to a second

year of AAI) increased the awareness of the multiple roles in which they served, especially in connecting with marginalized students.

Results from Axial Coding

As a result of rounds of selective coding and further analysis, a tentative core set of characteristics emerged to address Research Question 1 pertaining to students' perceptions of AAI in the school setting. Results revealed that the dogs were deemed as *mediators of change* for addressing multiple stressors. Students were identified in two categories: (a) maximum use of AAI, which were students who requested more time with the therapy dogs and (b) minimal use of AAI, which were students who were exposed on a school-wide level. Both groups of students, although to differing degrees, identified AAI as a way to combat loneliness, anxiety, the need to be noticed, home situations, esteem, peer pressure, and acceptance. In addition, data collected from teachers revealed that the dogs served *academic challenges* of students, such as motivation, concentration, positive behaviors, and some personal needs. Figure 1 depicts the characteristics of AAI categorized by need, which is referred to as a *Typology of Personal and Academic Wellness Needs*.

The conditions and interactions are tactics that lead to the central phenomenon or intervening conditions that facilitate or hinder change. Artifacts such as emails and letters from students were examined to triangulate the data collected from the interactions with Josie.

Results from Selective Coding

Data also revealed that the mere presence of Josie and Hank impacted a sense of community because the therapy dogs were an open example of how to be compassionate. As a result, students recognized a sense of *collective wellness*.

Interestingly, students recognized that the dogs could meet the needs of all students and that these needs were unique, ranging from simply creating a positive model of acceptance to being a helper for students to learn basic life skills. Regardless of the level of need, students depended on the AAI relationship for unconditional acceptance. In short, school climate was impacted because Josie and Hank served in the role of accepting friend. In the following section, these areas are addressed through the emergent themes of warmth and compassion, a sounding board, and ownership of self and others, curative factors toward connectedness and positive school climate.

Substantive-Level Theory: Factors of AAI

As previously noted, the physical presence of therapy dogs provides a model and venue for learning compassion and for meeting the personal and academic needs of students as a type of curative factor. The physical presence of Josie and/or Hank was perceived as calming and therapeutic toward a sense of feeling better— or what might be the actualization of the term *therapy dog*. Repeated reference was made to the dogs as *providing light*, or guiding force for students who seemed to have a bad day. A sense of warmth and compassion was revealed as a major factor for positive school climate by students, teachers, staff, and parents alike. The sight, touching of, or even simply the thought of the dogs aided in the process of healing from stressors at school or at home. Students disclosed that times of depression and anger were better manageable when seeing the dogs because they unconditionally responded to their emotions.

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of students with respect to effects of AAI?

Warmth and Compassion

Warmth and compassion emerged as a central attribute to the presence of Josie and Hank. It included both the physical connection between the dogs and students such as touching the fur and meeting close to the floor to be nearer each other. It also included a type of *slowing down* for the school day. This idea was captured by a teacher in the following description:

The school climate when the dogs are here just feels a little warmer. Most people like animals, and to see them in a school setting seems to calm the kids. It just makes me smile to see them here. I'm a huge dog-lover and I miss my dog while I'm away. So having them here is nice. If I'm passing by Hank or Josie, it's just instinct to want to stop and pet them. I think that's a security or a comfort thing for me. It's soothing.

One of the students explained how the warmth and compassion extended from Josie and/or Hank to every student, especially for those students who might not experience gentle acceptance.

On Monday when I am tired and don't want to go to school they make me feel better and they uplift my attitude. I also see other peoples' attitude change. They might have some family issues at home, and then they look forward to seeing the dogs when they get back to school on Monday or any other day. Some people may seem like they don't fit in, but you are who you are, and nobody can change that. When people get bullied or just don't look forward to coming to school because they are an outcast, they look forward to seeing Hank and Josie here at

school. Others don't even like dogs and they come to school, looking forward to petting or talking to them. This has shown me that Hank and Josie are like creatures you can tell anything to, and they'll keep it a secret.

Additionally, the curative influence of AAI extended from school to home in an emotional sense as a way to *take the dogs home*. For example, a student who did not appear to be making friends with natural social groups requested that her picture be taken with the dogs on every occasion that they are at school so she could be with her dog family at home. Further, this student connected to other students through the picture-taking activity by having other students participate in her picture taking efforts. She links this activity to home by creating a small scrapbook with her mother that exclusively represents her interactions with the dogs. Another student noted the linking of school to home through AAI as follows:

In this story I will tell you how Hank and Josie changed my life. My old dog Landry had just previously died and I was sad. I cried the day that he died because my parents had gotten him from a friend before I was born. We all knew this day was coming. He was sick and had a huge cut around one of his eyes where our other dog Sandy had bitten him. So soon I went back to school but I felt sad and depressed. But the day after that Josie came in and I felt a little bit happier. I started to pet her I felt like my good old happy self.

A Sounding Board

Not surprisingly, as a developmental characteristic for adolescents, the need to find a non-judgmental place to reveal feelings—a sounding board—was central to the experience of AAI. Students were aware of their need to connect and communicate, especially during times of difficult challenges such as divorce or family changes. This

idea is represented by the way one student described Josie and Hank as “feelings detectors who could smell your sadness.” Students remarked that the presence of the dogs helped with dealing with illness or death in the family, the divorce of parents, disagreement with a parent, feelings of abandonment from a close friend, and simply having no friends. One student noted the recent death of a parent and how Josie sensed his sadness. Many of the aforementioned home stressors were explained by students as specific situations that might not be known by other students or teachers at school. The concept of AAI as a sounding board for students is inclusive of the idea that revealed through this data, students tended to keep family dealings private.

It was noted by the lead researcher, who also served as the handler for Josie and Hank that the dogs intuitively detect what is happening for students with respect to emotions. They seem to be able to connect with the students to try and help in any way they can. Students aide in this connection by simply *looking at the dogs*, or by interacting through actually talking to them. Key to this theme is the idea that the dogs serve as a type of mentor for students. This concept was revealed through students who explained ways in which they had been bullied and who believed that they did not belong. Students were particularly aware of ways in which the dogs made each and every *one student* feel special. Further, this awareness contributed to the collective sense of positive climate for attending to liveness and advocating for one and other. The usefulness of AAI as a sounding board was explained by a student as follows:

I am going to tell you a story, ok? Well it was a few months into school and I was having a HORRIBLE day, nothing was going my way. My parents were on my very last nerve and I had spent all week studying for three tests and failed every single one of them. Also, I had athletics just before my class and popped out my

knee during the double bleacher mile and when I got here I was crying at my desk with my head down and Josie came over and put her head in my lap and I just knew everything was going to be ok and at school I think if Josie helps other kids like she helped me we might have a lot less bullying, because the bullies were bullied first.

Another student recognized:

Some people don't have a lot of friends, or they are constantly bullied. Hank and Josie can't talk or criticize. They can't call the kids names or make fun of them. Instead, they sit calmly and soak in the affection. This can make kids feel special or wanted by someone.

Students were able to address abstract concepts such as loneliness and forgiveness when explaining the presence of Josie and Hank as a way for: (a) filling a sense of being alone, (b) feeling safe with someone, (c) not being judged, and (d) unconditional acceptance when expressing a problem. Students believed strongly about the role of Josie and Hank as unconditional friends and confidants who care and understand. Critical to being a sounding board is the ideas that dogs: (a) do not judge others, (b) do not form opinions, (c) listen without criticizing, and (d) no fear of being yelled at.

Ownership In Self and Others

The theme of ownership in self and others builds on the collective knowing that occurred during this study. This collective knowing revealed how students could impact school climate by being taking care of "myself" and also feeling a sense of responsibility for taking care of others. Further, learning and academics were directly impacted by the sense of ownership of school climate by teachers and students alike. Students provided

evidence to actually understanding the different personalities of the dogs such as the way one student remarked:

Josie and Hank make a difference to me personally because if I have to do a speech in front of a bunch of people, they help me build confidence to announce my information to everyone. Josie is a spectacular creature. She helps me feel happy when I'm sad. Hank is a confidence builder, to me he encourages everyone.

Another student recognized:

After an argument, whenever Josie is around, she brings a chill, protective, secure and safe feeling with her. She lets me know that it will be okay once I pet her. Hank, he just brings a confident, joyful, energetic light into a dark hallway that has everyone feeling just as confident and energetic. Almost as if he is giving a push at our knees, to make us keep moving forward and finish the day strong.

Teachers remarked on how the student/pet relationship could be incorporated in the learning process (e.g., differentiated instruction), positive student behavior, student motivation, and students' ability to respond or react to a stressor. Likewise, students were thankful for the impact that the dogs made in the classroom to target a sense of calm. Students revealed a sense of responsibility to help themselves and each other, which was facilitated by the dogs, to make a difference in spirit, cheerfulness, and to stay focused in the classroom. This attribute was also facilitated on many levels by the handler of Josie and Hank by the way that AAI was integrated into common school activities. The following account was documented by one of the primary researchers/handler:

Students [from a Life Skills class environment] were sitting in the cafeteria lined up next to one another. This was routine. There was an aide at the lead of the line, followed by a female student and another student [who I will call] Leslie. When I approached the group with one of the dogs (Josie), the first student reached for Leslie's hand and placed it on Josie's body. She began petting Josie with Leslie's hand. A smile appeared for both of the girls. From then on, Leslie began to reach out to Josie on her own. The reward of watching Leslie overcome her fear was priceless. In December of that year, the Life Skills students were gathered in the library. When we walked in, Leslie came moving toward us in a much faster than normal pace. Leslie eagerly reached toward Josie and smiled. She knelt down near us, started petting Josie, and smiled again. Leslie did not speak much, but at that moment she said, "Dog. Soft dog." In the months that followed, I continued to make visits with our Life Skills students.

With respect to school climate as a whole, students expressed the gravity to "be like the dogs" for helping each other. School atmosphere was described as (a) more cheerful, (b) calmer, and (c) less up tight. Students noticed this collective helping they learned through the dogs as a way to: (a) calm down, (b) become quiet, and (c) focus on the work. In this sense, AAI was not a distraction in class but was rather a vehicle to minimize distractibility and classroom disruption. Students noticed how AAI allowed their classmates to do their work and to listen to the teacher, resulting in fewer problems and less disruptive classroom behavior. Further, attachments to the dogs seemed to provide a renewed purpose for some students to complete their work. The quiet presence of Josie and/or Hank was described by students as a comforting way to slow

down what might seem like a very active climate in the classroom. For example, one student commented:

[One day last year] I was not having such a good day. I was getting bad grades, after bad grades. At lunch, people at my lunch table were screaming at each other and throwing a fit. When I walked into the classroom after lunch and saw Josie just sitting right in front of the classroom, I just felt so happy. I had so much stress on my shoulders that day that when I pet Josie, all that stress just came sliding off my shoulders like melted butter sliding off a hot pan. If Josie was not there I probably would have had a bad attitude the rest of the day and kept on going my way.

The influential, critical common attribute that impacted a sense of ownership in self and others was the bond formed with the dogs as a type of accountability or *pet-owner responsibility*. Many students referred to Hank and Josie as “my dogs” but students also seem to understand how to respect any distance needed by the dogs. In addition, students seemed to be aware that Josie and Hank served the school in multiple roles - ranging from the role of *school greeters* in the hallway before the school day began and the role of *significant helper* for students learning critical life skills. The awareness of the significant helper role was explained by one Grade 7 student as follows:

[There is a boy named] “Bob” who is not always “there”. He is not the most sociably accepted. I do not know, but I think he has something along the lines of slight autism. He does not have random fits of rage, but when he sees the dogs he calms down. He has admitted to not liking dogs, yet he hovers around these two. He is in regular classes, and he suffers from bullying. I admit to not liking

him myself. But he is calm and composed around the dogs. He seems to forget the world around him for five or ten minutes. Yes this impacts his learning for this time, but he is quieter the rest of the day.

Research Question 2: In what ways, if any, does AAI impact student connectedness and/or wellness?

Table 1 illustrates selected phrases used by students for revealing the curative factors for connectedness and school climate associated with the three themes of warmth and compassion, sounding board, and ownership of self and others.

To address theoretical sampling (i.e. comparing research questions with empirical research for suturing a category), additional letters and drawings were examined through coding and memos (Charmaz, 2006), as well as debriefing for increased awareness (Frels & Onwegbuzie, 2013).

Friesen (2010) regarded research over the period of 30 years and concluded that using the school as a context, animals as a type of therapy provide a non-judgmental experience without the complications and expectations of human relationships. This unique interaction may offer children a valuable form of social and emotional support in educational and therapeutic settings. She remarks that educators typically use the term support as a direct and verbal involvement, yet similar to the way that play therapists have approached work in the school, AAI can bridge some of the limits of traditional communication. Pomrenke (2007) utilized grounded theory to understand resiliency in pre-teen children and proposed that external support systems increase a sense of security and refuge for children. Further, the grounded theory methodology increased awareness for including the voices of children as “active players in their own identity” (p. 372).

Nimer and Lundahl (2007) clarify that AAT is a supplemental intervention treatment which has been used in various settings, including hospitals, therapy clinics, libraries, and special-needs classrooms. The word therapy is defined in the Merriam Webster's collegiate dictionary (n.d.) as the "treatment of bodily, mental, or behavioural disorder(s)." The term therapy dog may imply that these animals have the ability to treat children's emotional, behavioral, or physical difficulties and therefore may not appropriately describe the work that such dogs do in the context of AAT.

Moustakas (1991) explained, "through exploratory open-ended inquiry, self-directed search, and immersion in active experience, one is able to get inside the question, become one with it, and thus achieve an understanding of it" (p. 15). In this discovery, the researcher/handler noted,

From the perspective of the handler, an early morning at the junior high school may begin where many students are frantically preparing for their day, and the handler with her dog are preparing the frantic. As students enter the building, many of their faces are drawn until they catch a glimpse of Josie or Hank. With that glimpse, an enthusiastic "Josie!" or "Hank!" is followed by predictable clear direct eye contact and gravitation toward the handler and the dog. For many, this moment invariably changes how their school day begins.

Discussion

It is important to note that designing and implementing AAI on any campus is not an easy task. To this end, much like the AAI program in this study, AAI must be led by a team of dedicated professionals, inclusive of the campus and district administration. Further, as seen in the findings, teachers embraced AAI with an open mind—maximizing the benefits of AAI on multiple layers—such as motivating a student to

complete work or providing an incentive by scheduling extra time with a dog. We recognized through our findings that a successful AAI program must be a systemic program, similar to other programs outlined by ASCA (2012a). It should be proactive toward quality school counseling that is preventive as well as developmental in nature.

Consistent with the way meaningful learning depends upon a sense of community in the school (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Dollarhide and Saginak (2012) suggested that school counselors must promote meaning-making activities to nurture inclusive factors belonging and spirituality such as hope, compassion, respect, honest, integrity, service to others, purpose in life or career. In this study, two important results specifically addressed the expansion of spirituality. By allowing students to become co-researchers of AAI and school climate, the students became sparks and advocates in (a) their own abilities as researchers and (b) the importance of respecting diversity and various needs of one and other. In addition, the engagement of student co-researchers helped in the grounded theory to provide practical applications for AAI that are most relevant to students. The ASCA (2014) Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success can be mapped onto the emergent themes for developmental areas specific to addressing *a whole life perspective* (Dollarhide, 1997) for middle school students, especially in the area of spirituality. For example, Mindset 3: Sense of Belonging in the School Environment (ASCA, 2014) is addressed by the theme Ownership of Self and Others; Behavior (Social Skill) 4: Demonstrate Empathy is comparative to the theme of Sounding Board.

When recognizing the role of a school counselor as instruction-based consultant, Scott, Royal, and Kissinger (2015) clarified that reducing obstructions to optimal classroom learning environments depends on relational components of trust and

sharing. One implication of this study aligns the need to address the proactive consultation work of a school counselor in the area of Response to Intervention (RTI), which depends on a multilevel framework of behavioral, academic, social, and/or emotional services to improve schools and increase student learning (McInerney & Elledge, 2013). The findings of this study are relevant to RTI in that student relationship could be identified on a spectrum: (a) a holistic school benefit (Tier 1), or what we regard as a positive school climate through the presence of AAI; (b) providing wellness factors to students presenting a deficit/need to spend more time with AAI for social, emotional, or academic relationships (Tier 2); (c) infusing AAI purposefully to identified students (by self or teachers) who benefit most from the therapeutic factors of AAI. Figure 2 presents the overall potential roles of AAI aligned with the three tiers of RTI and an additive fourth tier, identified as ongoing support in the area of life skills or individual goals.

Another implication of this study applies to challenges of school counselors for accountability, action research, and data-driven outcomes. By engaging students as co-researchers, school counselors can align data collection efforts with efforts in the delivery system of the ASCA National Model (2012a). In fact, the curative factor of ownership of self and others emerged from data whereby students identified particular divides amongst them, such as wealth, ethnicity, popularity, cognitive ability, and learning approaches. To this end, students can become cognizant of the collective effort of school climate ownership and began to initiate dialogue as *agents of change*.

Interestingly, the ASCA National Model situates a statement for the role of the professional school counselor, which is to be “mindful of school and community perceptions” (ASCA, 2012a, para 5). As such, it is puzzling to recognize how data

collection utilizing students as co-researchers for policy voice is seldom used. Further, Wright (2012) warranted the need for school leaders to draw on *qualitative research methods* as part of a systematic educational evaluation based on the American Evaluation Association (AEA) standards, one of which alarms school leaders to avoid over-dependence on traditional educational accountability systems as a “a one-size-fits-all approach that may be insensitive to local contextual variables or to local educational efforts” (AEA, 2006, para 3). It makes sense that school counselors empower students in a qualitative research process.

Limitations

As noted by Charmaz (2005), no analysis can be neutral. Although the research stance was critical dialectical pluralism (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2013) using a social justice stance, the power differences between lead researchers (a university instructor and campus instructor) cannot be denied. Other potential limitations most relevant to grounded theory were addressed using Charmaz’s (2005) criteria, some of which are: (a) *Credibility* questions such as has the researcher achieved intimate familiarity with the setting or topic? (b) *Originality* questions such as Are the categories fresh? Do they offer insights? (c) *Resonance questions* such as do the analytic interpretations make sense to members and offer them deeper insights about their lives and worlds? And (d) *Usefulness* questions such as can the analysis spark further research in other substantive areas?

Future Research

Future research in the area of AAI might benefit from the use of qualitative or mixed methods research, to understand not just what is happening in AAI, but how changes in connectedness and school climate are enhanced by AAI. In addition, other

researchers might involve students in the research process, much like the *Critical Dialectical Pluralism* research stance (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2013) to empower participants beyond the findings of the study. This approach not only teaches them research and ethics, but also provides a sense of pride and ownership in the findings to impact their school climates.

Conclusion

Due to the very natural response that most students experience with AAI, it is a program that taps into what Benson (2004) delineated as a strength-based dimension for adolescent development for spirituality. Future research for student connectedness, and school climate might differentiate how breadth (how often AAI occurs on any one campus) and depth (how various populations respond to AAI) align with the call by Fine (2010) for expanding institutional considerations and evidence-based practice for AAI.

In closing, in an interview about the Common Core Curriculum and the role of school counselors, the ASCA Assistant Director Eric Sparks delineated the importance for school counselors to emphasize the connection of school to students' lives and other interests (Learning First Alliance, 2014) and the ASCA (2014) Mindsets & Behavior Standards. Through the systemic program of AAI, three domains of behaviors were addressed: learning strategies, self-management skills, and social skills. It is our hope that through by aligning the therapeutic factors from this study with practical campus-wide programs such as ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors and RTI, educators and school leaders might unite with community resources for the increased utilization of AAI; and at the very minimum will increase the dialogue for ways to impact student connectedness and school climate through relational interactions. Figure 3 depicts the famous and much-loved Josie displaying her therapeutic techniques.

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Appendix

Table 1

Themes, characteristics, and examples from students

Characteristics of the theme Warmth and Compassion and Curative Factor Outcome	
Respond to our emotions-have ability to tell how we are feeling and will act accordingly to meet our needs	Emotion regulation
Make me feel almost important-help me feel happy and forget about everything that is happening	Feeling valued
Provide light needed to guide some through the day: hope for light in darkness	Hope
Feeling of real connection to Josie-as if she is the only real meaning of happiness	Connectedness
Type of anti-depressant that does not come in a pill form	Meaningful antidote
The light at the end of the tunnel after a rough morning	Resilience
Living painkillers	Relationships for living
Prevent depression [identified "like myself"]	Awareness
Characteristics of the theme Sounding Board and Curative Factor Outcome	
Do not judge-someone without an opinion-will listen-can't talk or criticize-can say things to them without being yelled at or judged	Value for being human
Provide comfort and safety-feel safe and "at home"	Trust
Make one feel like they are "special," "wanted"; "something"-they belong	Sense of belonging/connectedness

Characteristics of the theme Ownership in Self and Others and Curative Factor Outcome

Hank models confidence and an energetic attitude- has everyone feeling just as confident and energetic	Collective responsibility for good Positive approach to learning
“Life savers” & “Superheroes” saving the day	Concept of hero
Encouraging almost as if he is giving a push at students’ knees	Encouragement
Hank keeps us moving forward, and finish the day strong	Finishing strong
Remind some of the good in the world	Altruism
Are the kind of things we need in school	School as a home
Make everyone’s day great-make people smile	Value of smiling

Figure 1

Typology of Personal and Academic Wellness Needs.

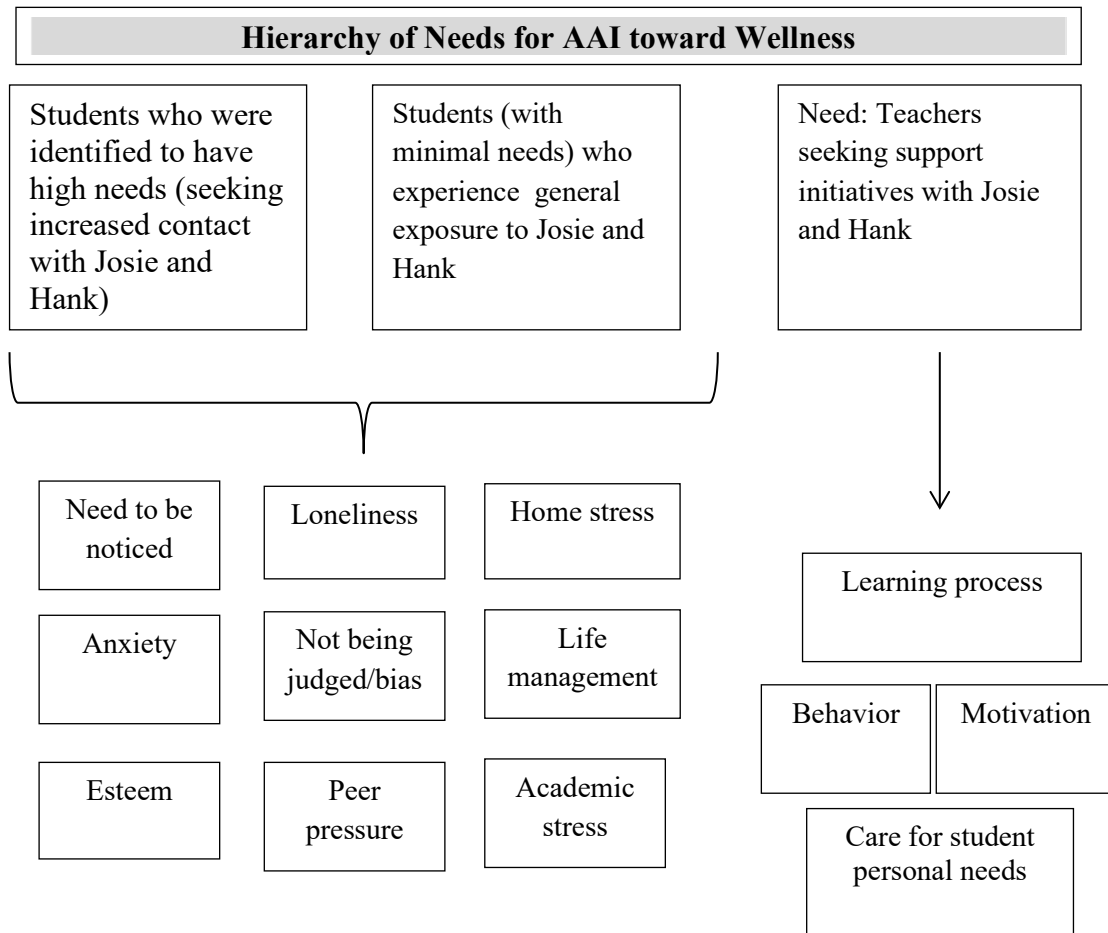


Figure 2

The use of Animal Assisted Intervention based on a tiered Response-to-Intervention model.

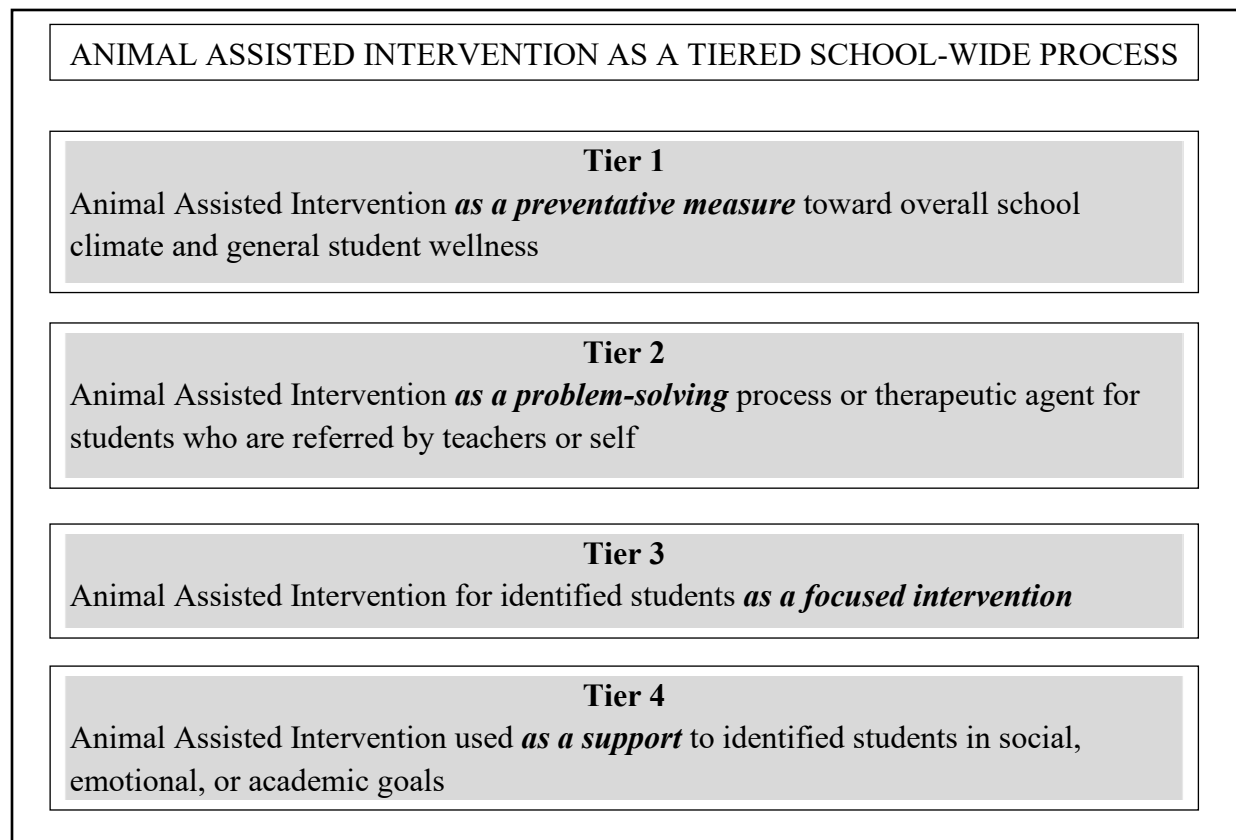


Figure 3

Josie and her therapeutic technique.

