

The Role of Animal-Interventions in Alternative Schools in England - The Why, the How and the Recommendations for Policy

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Abstract

Animals have long been considered companions to humankind; before the research into the why or how, people have had “man’s best friend” in their family home providing unconditional love and companionship for the past hundred and thirty years (Ernst, 2014). The power of dogs to just love humans, provide their owners with a sense of purpose, and to contribute to a positive mental well-being has long been documented (Anderson, 2011). However, the rise of dogs in schools has only really taken off in western cultures in the last decade, with more and more schools introducing an emotional support animal, a facility dog, or using animal-assisted learning with profoundly positive reported outcomes (Kropp & Shupp, 2017).

Published research on this topic within an educational context spans back a mere thirty-five years ago when dogs were introduced as support animals in schools (Fine, 2019). And whilst there is a growing body of research supporting the use of dogs in schools, these tend to be primary based and very anecdotal. There is still very few secondary school based studies (Kropp & Shupp, 2017) and even fewer that are linked to alternative education where the impact with some of the lowest attainers, or those with highest ACE’s may see the greatest gains. My research presents the largest study to date on the perceived impact of having a school dog in alternative education, to determine if the hype is backed by impact. I have conducted a national questionnaire on all three hundred and thirty-eight alternative provisions registered with the department of education in England to explore how many are using a school dog in their provisions. There is currently no formal guidance from the department of education on this type of intervention, or statutory awarding body for qualifications for animals in schools. From this data, I have conducted four case studies from schools that have used animal interventions for over three years to carry out semi-structured interviews with both the head teachers from these provisions and an additional member of staff, before also collecting their demographical data for comparison. Using a thematic analysis, combined with results with Nvivo I wish to present my findings and recommendations for policy. As youth mental wellbeing and absenteeism from school remains a prominent topic for education and from the national survey conducted nearly half of the of the schools that replied did have a animal-assisted learning within their provision.

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The current body of research in this field lacks rigor in its methodology and concrete findings to support leaders in education to embrace or revoke this strategy. This research aims to uncover perceptions in the value of this strategy using a multi-case study approach that will look to summarise the uptake of this intervention for impact and practicality. The findings from this research will conclude for leaders in alternative provisions the intervention strategies perceived to be making the most impact with the most disadvantaged and challenging young people across England. And the conclusions from this study will hopefully shed light on whether animal-assisted learning is worthy investment or a passing fad in education.

Keywords: Animal-Assisted Learning, Animal Intervention, Positive Childhood Experiences