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Exploring The Role of Canine-Assisted Services (CAS) In Alternative Schools in England: A Collective Case Study to Reflect on Current Implementation, And Future Practices

Dr Lilian Christine Dehnel

University of Buckingham, the United Kingdom

Abstract

The popularity of dogs in schools has steadily increased in England over the last decade, with more and more schools introducing an emotional support animal, a facility dog, or using animal-assisted interventions with emerging positive outcomes. The language and incorporation of animal-assisted services is evolving. Recent studies lay claim to dogs improving attendance, student behaviour and attainment in schools but up until now there has been little research into whether these benefits are replicated in alternative education. This research explored the perceived impact of having a school dog in alternative education settings via case study research, to determine if the current studies are supported by school leaders that service the country's most vulnerable children. To explore this, insider research was conducted using a mixed-method approach consisting of an initial survey of registered alternative schools in England in 2022, followed by case study research with provisions that had longstanding practices (over two years). The collective case study design consisted of interviews with headteachers and teachers, alongside documentary data collection that underwent a thematic analysis further supported by NVivo for each of the four cases. The findings from this research were multi-faceted and the survey highlighted that canine-assisted services were taking place in less than half of the schools that responded to the survey. While the cross-case analysis identified that schools with sustained practices of this service largely continued this for the positive experiences it provided young people. The conclusions from this study highlight that where implemented, canine-assisted services are having a positive impact within England's alternative schools. One further and unexpected finding was the positive perception having a canine in school made to staff well-being amongst diverse staff groups, which is an area for future research. Not just a passing fad in education, this research is able to provide support for the continued development of the role of canine-assisted services in England's alternative settings.

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