

PAWS Your Stress: The Student Experience of Therapy Dog Programming

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Abstract: Animal Assisted Activity (AAA) programs have emerged as a popular form of support for students. This study is an in-depth, qualitative examination of the experiences and perspectives of four frequent student participants of an AAA program at a Midwestern Canadian university. Semi-structured interviews resulted in identification of common themes in the student experience. Participants reported that the program provided opportunities to be in-the-moment, facilitated social connections, and complemented existing healthy coping skills. Students also expressed feeling loved, comforted, and supported. Implications and recommendations for AAA programming in a post-secondary setting are discussed.

Keywords: Animal Assisted Activities, Therapy Dogs, Student Stress, Student Wellbeing

Introduction

Animal assisted activities (AAAs) are gaining popularity as a supportive intervention for a wide variety of people and in diverse settings. Increasingly, Canadian post-secondary institutions are exploring ways to offer support to students who are presenting with a growing range of mental health concerns (Matthews & Csiernik, 2019; Storrie, Ahern, & Tuckett, 2010). At least 67 of Canada's 78 publicly funded universities offered AAAs as one response to school-based supports for student mental health (Gillet et al., 2016). These programs include the most common support animal, dogs (Delta Society, 2019), and their human handlers at drop-in programming in public spaces on campuses (Lannon & Harrison, 2015). One such program, *PAWS Your Stress*, offers opportunities for students to interact with therapy dogs from the St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog program at a Midwestern Canadian university.

This article provides an in-depth examination of the experiences of four frequent student participants of this AAA program. The students' descriptions of the most meaningful and helpful aspects of the program are highlighted, providing insight into the student experience. Given that the underpinnings of AAA programs are largely relationship-based, there is a specific need for further research in this area that captures the explicit experiences of the participants. Though some researchers place high value on standardized approaches to Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI) research (Stern & Chur-Hansen, 2013), there are other perspectives that allow for a more open-ended qualitative approach (Merriam, 2002). Given that findings rooted in basic qualitative research are typically not generalizable by nature, mixed methods studies where standardized assessments are performed in conjunction with qualitative study provide space to examine these findings in more depth. While quantitative data can provide insight into many aspects of AAA programs, the perspective of the participant is largely missed. As such, a detail-rich qualitative methodology was key to this study. This article provides an exploratory perspective for further understanding about the student experience of an AAA therapy dog program.

Related Literature

Animal Assisted Interventions

Animal Assisted Interventions are interventions that facilitate the bond between people and animals, with most attention focussed on the benefit it provides to humans (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007). AAIs are carried out by a qualified handler (Chandler, 2005) and usually involve dogs that meet specific criteria (Delta Society, 2019). The most common form of AAI is Animal Assisted Activities, in which pet dogs visit with individuals in their community who do not have regular access to a pet. Dogs taking part in these interventions are unique in comparison to other working dogs. While service dogs assist an owner with a disability, therapy dogs provide support to people other than the dog's owner. Therapy dogs are required to be calm, friendly, and accepting of human interaction so they can engage with the recipients of their service in an effective manner (Delta Society, 2019). However, they are not typically trained to provide specific individualized interventions in the way that service dogs are, and so characteristics of therapy dogs such as temperament and interest in people are necessary in

order to facilitate interaction between AAA participants and the therapy dogs.

AAI programs on campuses have evolved to provide services that are flexible and broad ranging, facilitating interactions primarily as AAA between dogs and people. AAIs of various types have been shown to improve participant pain outcomes (Anson, 2014), improve psychiatric patient outcomes (Berget et al., 2008), improve drug rehabilitation outcomes (Dell, 2018; Adams et al. 2015), enhance emotional wellbeing (Niemer & Lundahl, 2007), reduce distress (Crossman et al., 2015), enhance the release of endorphins (Odendaal & Meintjes, 2003), and reduce psychological stress levels (Crump & Derting, 2015). These findings have led to curiosity about the ways that students themselves experience the programs. The researchers of the current study aimed to investigate how students experience the PAWS Your Stress therapy dog program, as expressed in their own words.

A number of researchers in recent years have explored the impact of participation in these programs on students' wellbeing on Canadian campuses. Participation in therapy dog programs has shown to reduce students' perceived stress and homesickness (House et al., 2018), improve students' mood (Crossman et al., 2015; Graifoner et al., 2017), and reduce their anxiety levels and blood pressure (Wood et al., 2018; Ward-Griffin et al, 2018). Post-secondary students report several common stressors including academic pressures, finances, and sleep difficulties (Versaevel, 2014). At times when these stressors are most prominent (i.e., final exams), therapy dog programs can positively influence the way students perceive their family supports and stressors (Barker et al., 2017), and generally help students reduce their stress (Barker et al., 2016).

A number of Canadian researchers are working to understand the impact that therapy dog programs have on students' stress levels. Students report lower stress during exam periods when they spend time with a therapy dog (Reynolds & Rabschutz, 2011; Ward-Griffin et al., 2018). Students also report improved well-being (Binfet, 2017), and significantly lower levels of overall stress after engaging in drop-in therapy dog programming (Binfet et al., 2018). Physiologically, therapy dogs have been shown to provide a buffer effect for university students, reducing stress reactivity (Fiocco & Hunse, 2017).

Given the above information, there is some evidence of the helpful nature of stress reduction through therapy dog programming among university students. There is less information, however, on how students themselves describe their experience of the program. This study aims to further our understanding about the nature of what students experience when they attend these programs. That is, we are interested in knowing, in the student participants' own words, how they describe their interactions with therapy dogs on campus?

Student Mental Health

It is well-established that post-secondary student life is stressful. In fact, reported levels of stress have been steadily rising among students (Boyle, 2018; Corrigan et al., 2016). With higher rates of stress, there are increased associated concerns with students' physical and mental health, as well as lower levels of academic performance (Edlin & Golanty, 2014). Further, the life stage of development that exists between adolescence and early adulthood, often referred to as *emerging adulthood*, is known to be inherently stressful (Sussman & Arnett, 2014). This stage is uniquely characterized by identity exploration, feeling in-between, entertaining possibilities, self-focus, and instability (Sussman & Arnett, 2014). Emerging adulthood is also correlated with increased levels of loneliness (Qualter et al., 2015).

Demands for mental health support have been steadily increasing on college campuses (Pedrelli et al., 2015; Prince, 2015). With this increased demand, there is a reported increase in both frequency and severity of student mental health concerns (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Storrie et al., 2010). In a study of students' mental health across 19 college campuses in eight countries, rates of mental disorders, as well as the demands for services to address them, were found to be increasing (Auerbach et al., 2018). Ten percent of university students were reported to have thoughts of suicide (Auerbach et al., 2018). One third of students were reported to meet diagnostic criteria for either: a mood disorder, anxiety disorder, or substance use disorder (Auerbach et al., 2018).

Though many students report stress and mental illness and could benefit from an intervention, fewer students actually seek out support (Regehr et al., 2013). Some researchers argue that stigma leads to decreased access to mental health care (Corrigan et al., 2016; Knaak et al., 2017; Storrie et al., 2010). Stigma is experienced at high rates among certain populations including students, and especially among male, younger, international, religious, or low

socioeconomic status individuals (Darling et al., 2018; Eisenberg et al., 2009; Lynch et al., 2018). Students may underestimate their mental health concerns, put off help-seeking until their problem is more serious, or they may never seek help at all (Corrigan, 2004; MacKinnon, 2007). As such, even with the increased demand for mental health services reported in recent years, students' need for mental health support may be underestimated.

By gathering information through a basic interpretive qualitative analysis, drawing on individual, in-depth participant interviews, the meaningful information collected in this study will help us to better understand what exactly it is about the AAAs that are helpful for post-secondary students. Individual perspectives of the student's own experiences may provide insight into what they find to be helpful in terms of reducing their stress. The open-ended nature of conversations with students allowed them to qualitatively express their thoughts with detail. This research takes the existing knowledge a step further, investigating the students' experiences in their own words.

Current Study and Methodology

Setting and Context

The *PAWS Your Stress* program is a student-run wellness initiative, similar to many other programs across Canada that offer AAA sessions to students, like the Blue Ribbon Therapy Dogs at McGill University (Lannon & Harrison, 2015). Teams consisting of one adult handler and one therapy dog, volunteering through St. John Ambulance, aim to provide: (a) comfort/love, and (b) support to those who visit the dogs and their handlers (St. John Ambulance, 2019). The St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog program ensures safety for both the human and canine participants. Dogs are tested for temperament markers that identify them as safe, calm, and supportive therapy dogs. Their enjoyment in visiting is also monitored as their handlers observe their dogs' body language and participation. Handlers with the program are also screened for suitability and matched with locations through a St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog program coordinator. It is the role of the handler to provide ongoing documentation of any issues with regard to their dog's behaviour, as well as vaccination and other health records (St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program, 2019).

The PAWS Your Stress on-campus program in which the participants attended and is the subject of the current study brings therapy dog teams to campus libraries twice per month during the school term. Sessions are offered several times per week in the final examination periods in December and April each year. Two-hour "drop-in" group sessions are offered for all visits, with typically two to three dog and handler teams in a large room, serving up to a few dozen participants at any given time. Participants are free to attend for however long they want and for as few or as many sessions as they wish. The program averages over 100 student visits per session, representing all university disciplines and levels of study (A. Husband, Personal Communication, July 22, 2015). This study was approved by the Human and Animal Research Ethics Boards at the University of Saskatchewan. The St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog program, where the dogs for the PAWS Your Stress program are located, agreed to this study taking place.

Procedure and Participants

The goal of this study was to elicit rich, qualitative information through open-ended dialogue with the study participants, which was then organized into themes that illustrate commonalities among the participants. To achieve this goal, this study was guided by the technique of Basic Interpretive Qualitative Research Design (BIQRD) (Merriam, 2002). BIQRD is a research method designed to understand "how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon" (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). Through the interactions between participants and the therapy dogs, potentially meaningful experiences may occur. The personal, lived experience of the participants provide insight into the meanings they derive from the interactions. Information was gathered through inductive reasoning to gain knowledge of the unique perspectives of the participants involved in the research. BIQRD involves the assumption that specific experiences that have been facilitated as a result of the program have interpretations that may differ among participants. BIQRD also facilitates the participants turning their experience into words that can then be matched with commonalities of other participants' words. The unique perspective of the participant, as well as commonalities among small groups, can come to light with this methodology.

Participants were recruited at therapy dog sessions. The researcher provided a stack of recruitment handouts to the program coordinator to provide to attendees detailing information about the study generally and the interview

process. A \$15 gift card was offered in exchange for the participants’ time. The attendees contacted the researcher and provided their availability. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the confidentiality of the participants. All participants were required to be “frequent attendees” of the program, meaning they attended more than four of the eight sessions offered during the term in which the research was conducted. The function of this requirement was to have enough experiences to draw from, to encourage a detailed interview with diverse experiences of the program. Four adult female participants were interviewed (See Table 1). Recruitment of males would have been welcomed; however, no male participants met the criteria for being interviewed. Two participants self-reported they were new to Canada, and one participant voluntarily self-identified as “Queer”. All participants reported predominantly positive experiences of the program. Some barriers to personal pet ownership were discussed, including money, time, and restrictions of student or rental housing. All four participants presented as open and comfortable relaying their experiences during the interviews, taking time to formulate responses to the questions posed by the researcher.

Table 1: Participant Descriptions

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Undergraduate Program</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Additional Disclosures</i>
<i>Mira</i>	Arts & Science	F	New to Canada
<i>Dominique</i>	Arts & Science	F	New to Canada
<i>Jenaya</i>	Health Science	F	-*
<i>Crystal</i>	Education	F	Queer (Self-identified)

* No self-identified disclosures

Private spaces were booked by the researcher in small rooms at the libraries where the participant had been interacting with the therapy dogs. These spaces offered privacy and convenience for the students. Participants’ familiarity with the setting was also desired as it may have helped refresh memories of the therapy dog sessions in that setting. After obtaining verbal and written consent, students participated in an electronic recording of their interviews. Interviews were held for an approximate 60-minute duration, consisting of seven open-ended questions. These questions were designed to obtain balanced information about the participant’s experiences, offering opportunities to provide both negative and positive insight to the researcher. The interviewer provided neutral prompts to elicit further information such as “Could you tell me more about that?” Audio recordings of the interviews were kept on an encrypted and password protected laptop computer and transferred to an encrypted hard drive following the interviews. The researcher transcribed the interviews. All participants were offered a chance to review their transcripts but declined.

Exact transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative software program that helps to identify themes among written data. Twenty nodes were identified, then categorized and grouped to provide a framework for two categories of responses: Stress and Coping, and Meaning Derived from Participation. Further, each category contains multiple sub-themes (See Figure 1).

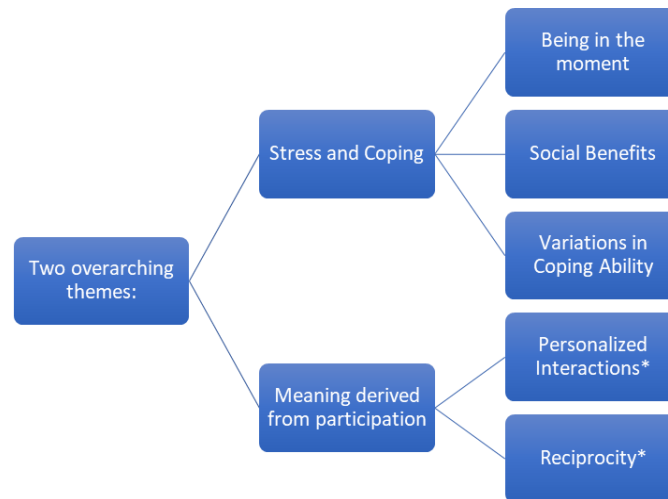


Figure 1: Findings related to St. John Ambulance program goals of “Love/Comfort and Support”

Results & Themes

In total, five themes were identified: being in-the-moment, social benefits, variations in coping ability, personalized interactions, and reciprocal interactions.

Stress and Coping

Participants shared aspects of the program that were related to their individual sources of stress. While participant perspectives differed in terms of how the program facilitated stress relief for them, each found a way to interact with the therapy dogs in a manner that matched their individualized needs for stress relief. For individuals whose interviews revealed a desire to connect with others, interactions with facilitators and friends at the program were described as important stress-reducing aspects of their participation. For those who expressed a need for comfort and stress reduction, their responses tended to focus on their interactions with the therapy dogs. Though the experience of stress was discussed by all participants, it was presented in a unique way by each person in relation to their experience of the therapy dog sessions.

Theme 1: Being in-the-moment. Participants expressed that the immediate effect of being with the therapy dogs was grounded in the opportunity to fully immerse themselves in the experience. A theme of *being in-the-moment* allowed participants to set aside their daily worries and simply ‘be’. Mira felt she could focus on the therapy dog and set the stress of her life aside for a moment, stating:

It’s just nice to turn your brain off for like 10 or 15 minutes and just pet the dogs and let the dogs do the thinking...you’re not really thinking about anything... I wasn’t really thinking, I was just petting him in-the-moment. Just petting.

Jenaya valued the therapy dogs’ ability to help her keep her mind away from her worries, expressing appreciation for the break from school while being conveniently located in the library. Janaya explained, “My mind is somewhere else now, instead of [what] I was stressing about... I just want to be here at this moment.” Dominique enjoyed the momentary opportunity to forget her stressors, expressing, “I kind of forget about my problems for a bit. Because it’s just there –it’s a time to just forget about everything.” Crystal noted that she experienced a shift in her state of mind, sharing that:

Beforehand I’m very in my mind... and afterwards that’s kind of gone away because I can focus on something else – something very in-the-moment. I can just let go of because they’re right there, so I can focus on the dog instead of school.

Participants commented that focusing on the therapy dog in-the-moment was an aspect of the program they each found helpful.

Theme 2: Social benefits. Participants spoke of the social benefits of attending the program. These social benefits enabled participants to be better connected to the experience of the program, empowered them to take control over their experiences, and helped them make new social connections. There may also be a social *buffer effect* that the dogs provide to explain the feelings of decreased social pressure, as the therapy dogs' mere presence seemed to make it easier for the participants to connect with other people in the room. Dominique discussed the struggle to make social connections as a new Canadian, explaining that she "just couldn't connect with people". The program functioned as a social conduit, "You get to meet people on campus, and you might meet people here that way, so I think it's good. It's double—like two good things." Mira appreciated the positive attitude of the handlers and participants, explaining, "they're always smiling. Nobody seems to be in a bad mood." In discussion of the program as a way for her friends to interact while engaging in a helpful activity, another participant, Jenaya, discussed the number of different connections the program facilitated with her friends, classmates, handlers, as well as the therapy dogs themselves. Not only did Jenaya discuss the impact of the therapy dogs, she found the nature of the program to be helpful to encourage social interactions that were casual: "There's so much more to it. Like meeting new people, maybe the owner, the student [who might] have dogs like me. They can share stories... the setting is like that, you can just talk." Crystal experienced feelings of social acceptance around the therapy dogs, explaining "as long as you're a good person... they'll be okay with you" and that the program "takes that level of stress off in terms of meeting other beings."

Theme 3: Variations in coping ability. The participants expressed feeling supported and better able to cope with their school related stress because of attending the therapy dog program. They discussed their use of the program as complementary to existing approaches in their lives (e.g., exercising, taking breaks, napping, etc.). Mira felt that while she was able to deal with stress well, the program provided her with an additional means of coping, saying she "thought of it as a stress reliever". Dominique saw herself as better able to cope after accessing the program, expressing it "makes [her] feel a lot better". Jenaya discussed learning lessons about stress relief and coping based on her own observations of the therapy dogs, accepting that breaks are important in dealing with stress. She explained:

You can see their energy level too... they've interacted with so many people and now they just want to relax. You see that shift and you realize it's normal. You can relate it to yourself, like maybe their energy is [drained] and now they need rest. Same as us.

Crystal described learning about managing stress, applying lessons learned from the program to her life at other times: "When I get worried or anxious, I find it's easier to bring myself down". Participants all agreed that their interactions with the therapy dogs helped them to feel more able to cope with stress. These interactions meant different things for each participant depending on the stress that was prominent in their lives at that time.

Meaning Derived from Participation

The second category is centered on participants' direct interactions with the therapy dogs. The two sub-themes related to these meaningful experiences are: the personalized interaction they had with the therapy dog, and engagement in a reciprocal manner with the therapy dog.

Theme 4: Personalized interactions. Personalized interactions with the therapy dogs were meaningful experiences for the participants. Participants interpreted the therapy dogs' behaviour and interaction to mean certain things about how they were perceived by the dogs, interpreting these messages as their own subjective certainty.

Mira noted, "[the dog] seems able to sense my emotions" and can "sense when something is going on" for the participants in their personal lives. This perception helped her feel more supported. Mira even took time to show off photos of herself and the therapy dog that she kept on her cell phone, illustrating the specific connection she felt to this dog. Mira said, "this dog, the black boxer, Subie, any time I pet that dog, he remembers me... It feels like maybe we have a connection that maybe he doesn't have with other people." Dominique also discussed the idea that "the dogs can sense it" because she perceived that she received more affection from the therapy dogs on days when her mood was lower. Jenaya also described her experiences with individual therapy dogs, making comments that indicated that she felt they had an innate understanding of her stressful experiences. She described her experience by saying: "I always feel like they understand... there might be something in them". Crystal described the feeling of having a dog return back to her as personally meaningful, "if they keep coming back to you [when] you're no longer

this new thing – it feels very loving.” The participants expressed that they had meaningful exchanges with the therapy dogs as a result of the personalized interaction they interpreted as having with them.

Theme 5: Reciprocity. Reciprocity describes the bidirectional affection between the participants and therapy dogs. Through these reciprocal exchanges, participants found that this dynamic helped them feel loved, comforted, and supported by the therapy dogs.

Mira explained her perceived complexity of the relationship between her and the therapy dogs, sharing, “I just feel like they’re reciprocating the affection, and giving [it] back, the dog’s giving that affection”. Dominique experienced reciprocity in the therapy dog’s behaviour, “I see the animal, the way they show affection, it’s almost like their energy level [shifts] and the way they react kind of reciprocates.” Jenaya described engaging in a mutual empathetic response that was part of her interpretation of meaning, saying “I want to interact with them too. It kind of goes in a mutual way...I feel like as much as they’re trying to please you, you’re trying to please them too”. Jenaya also described her feelings toward a therapy dog she had connected to, expressing that she felt like saying “you’re my special dog now in here!”. Crystal described that she felt a connection to the therapy dogs in terms of being influenced by their calming presence, expressing that she “found it very calming” to be in the company of a calm animal.

Some participants specifically mentioned reciprocated affection, while others focused more on the attention and energy brought forth by the therapy dogs. The intimate nature of contact between the participants and therapy dogs emerged as a personally meaningful experience for the participants, who all shared unique yet common perspectives on their reciprocal interactions with the therapy dogs.

Summary

Though these experiences are from a small number of participants, they are clear and concrete. The experiences contribute to the understanding in the literature about the meaning students take from their interactions with therapy dogs and the genuine form of love, comfort, and support they interpreted from their interactions. It addresses the gap in knowledge about *why* students find meaning and relief from their stressful lives when they attend therapy dog programs. All students emphasized an appreciation for the program, and its role in providing a safe and easily accessed program option. All students expressed a desire to continue attending the program, as well as a desire to encourage others to. Through these interviews, the connection between the participants and therapy dogs became clear, as many of the described experiences would not have been possible without the participation of the animal. Regardless of their source of stress, these meaningful interactions helped students feel loved, comforted and supported, which in turn helped them cope with stress.

Any discussion of the negative aspects of participation in the therapy dog program was related to accessing the program. All participants expressed a desire for more frequent and longer duration of the therapy dog sessions. They discussed the importance of being able to have one-on-one time with the therapy dogs, which could also be improved by having more therapy dog teams. This was especially important for students during the more popular sessions, where some participants felt there was not a sufficient number of therapy dogs to facilitate the individualized interaction that was meaningful and helpful for them.

The current study found that four frequently attending, female, post-secondary student participants, one of whom self-identified as Queer and two of whom self-identified as new to Canada, expressed positive experiences that both provided a means of relieving stress and facilitated connections that helped them feel loved, comforted, supported, and connected.

Integration of Findings with Current Literature

The Experience of Stress and Coping

Dogs are proving to be helpful as therapeutic facilitators (see Kogan & Blazina, 2019). The human-animal bond has a powerful influence on humans’ health and behaviour (Fine, 2019). One theory about the effectiveness of dogs is that they encourage people to be present, a phenomenon described by the participants in the current study. This concept of temporarily removing thoughts of the past and future from your mind is commonly referred to as

mindfulness (Schmidt, 2011). Mindfulness has emerged in Western practice as an evidence-based method for stress management (Parsons, et al. 2017). It also helps improve a myriad of other concerns including self-empathy, compassion, mood disturbances and anxiety (Greeson et al., 2015; van Dijk et al. 2017). It is possible that part of the participant experience of being *in-the-moment* is rooted in the practice of mindfulness, in that the dogs were able to bring people to a relaxed state where they could momentarily set their stressful thoughts aside.

Dell et al. (2015) found that being in-the-moment was common among participants in a university therapy dog program. In response to the statement, “I felt in control of my emotions (that is, balanced and in-the-moment) after spending time with the therapy dogs”, 84 percent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed. The *human-animal bond* has been shown to help individuals locked into hyper-vigilant and hyper-focused states (Taylor et al., 2013; White, 2011). Benefits may also be related to regulation of the nervous system. For example, five minutes of petting a dog can decrease cortisol (stress hormone) and increase oxytocin (the feel good hormone) significantly in humans (Handlin et al., 2011), which may explain part of the positive participant experience.

Making Meaning through Love, Comfort, and Support

Dogs have an innate ability to provide comfort and nurturance (Chandler, 2005). Chandler (2005) suggests that appropriate, genuine, and caring touch can be extremely meaningful to human wellbeing. Love, comfort, and support are important parts of the relationship built between people and therapy dogs. Interacting with a therapy dog allows levels of physical touch, for example, that would be inappropriate with a human facilitator.

The bidirectional relationship described by participants was most often linked with the feeling of being loved, in that that they felt love by being able to provide affection in return, a fundamental component in the experiences of the program. In a study of human-horse interactions, Chalmers (2014) explained a similar process of interpreting meaning based on participants’ observations, leading them to construct a dialogue on behalf of the animal “as if the horses were voicing their thoughts, feelings, and actions” (Chalmers, 2014, p. 205). Support of the other, self-empathy, and perspective taking are important components in creating a trusting bond (Arkow, 2015), which may be part of why participants felt loved, comforted, and supported in their relationships with the therapy dogs.

Limitations of the Research

This study is limited by its scope of reach due to the detailed and rich nature of qualitative data with a small sample size. This limitation, although it illustrates a limited range of applicability, also provides valuable, detailed information about the experiences of the participants who attend the PAWS Your Stress therapy dog program. The goals of this study were not to produce numeric data, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ experiences. The data collection for this study was straightforward, with no major barriers experienced by the researcher.

In conducting interviews only with frequent participants, those who may not have had an initially positive experience may be excluded from the data. If an individual did not have positive experiences at the sessions, they may not have wanted to discuss their experiences with a researcher. It is possible that participants who have had positive experiences at the AAA program were more likely to be present for an increased number of sessions and therefore more likely to be frequent participants. This process of finding participants made it difficult to obtain a potentially unbiased subset of participants and narrows the generalizability of the findings.

It is also a challenge to isolate for the variable of the therapy dog when they are accompanied by human handlers. Further, this study is limited by the omission of a valuable perspective from the animal itself. Some options for future studies might include observing animal’s body language by applying the Human Animal Interaction Scale (Fournier et al., 2017) or asking handlers to report their impression of the dog’s experience.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Given that many of the therapy dog program benefits identified were grounded to the participants’ individualized experiences with the therapy dogs, any improvements to increase the number and quality of the interactions would be of benefit. Increased access was especially important to those who had experiences where they desired more one-

on-one time with the therapy dogs. Based on the high value of personalized interactions, consistency in handler/dog teams may also be beneficial, which could result in more opportunities to build stronger relationships with the same therapy dog teams. Educators who are directly involved in mental health supports (e.g., learning resource, alternative programming teachers, social workers, counsellors, school psychologists, etc.) may serve students better with the integration of a therapy dog in group or individual setting. This may be feasible in that the therapy dog program is a volunteer initiative and does not have an associated cost. It may even function as a conduit for longer term benefits in schools, such as relationship building through the social benefits described by participants. Though some may choose to use their own dogs in the workplace, obtaining training and being tested through an established organization is essential. This is important because the therapy dogs themselves, whose calm temperament and interest in interacting with people are integral to what is meaningful to the participants. Dogs without these characteristics should not be recruited to participate in therapy dog programs, as there is potential for serious harm to both the dogs and human participants. Anyone interacting with therapy dogs should know that the dogs are tested, and safe to be around, especially if they are in a vulnerable state while looking for resources to cope with stress or other mental health challenges.

Therapy dog programming provides a potentially viable method of finding stress relief and experiencing genuine interactions that help students feel loved, comforted and supported. All participants felt that their attendance at the program was beneficial in their lives as students. It is the hope that with more access to programs such as therapy dogs that support student well-being, a wider range of services will be available to students to address this growing health need on campuses in Canada.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Rebecca Lalonde is a registered psychologist in two Canadian provinces (Saskatchewan and Quebec). She completed her Master’s degree in School and Counselling Psychology at the University of Saskatchewan in 2016. Since that time, she has worked as a psychologist in both public health and private practice settings. Rebecca is an active member of the psychology community, most recently serving on the Fall 2019 Oral Examinations panel with the Saskatchewan College of Psychologists. Current research and practice interests include ethical practice in healthcare and individual psychotherapy for students and professionals.

Colleen Dell, PhD, grounds her research in a community-based, patient-oriented participatory approach. It focuses on healing from addictions and mental health, with attention to Indigenous populations and animal assisted interventions. She is a Professor and Centennial Enhancement Chair in One Health and Wellness at the University of Saskatchewan, Department of Sociology. Her current projects include working with federal prisoners, university students, addictions clients and war veterans. Underlying her work is a commitment to bringing together different ways of knowing and the production of unique research-informed knowledge mobilization products, including music videos and paintings. In 2017, Colleen was named to the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem for her humanitarian work in the animal assisted intervention field.

Tim Claypool is a registered doctoral psychologist in Saskatchewan and Alberta with an Adjunct Professor appointment in the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education at the University of Saskatchewan. His previous research and related publications have focused on improving outcomes for Indigenous students within public school systems. More recently, his writing has focused on cultural allyship and the decolonization of various forms of mental health services. Tim was appointed by the SK College of Psychologists in 2019 to serve as their representation on the University of Saskatchewan Senate. Private practice opportunities have taken him to the province’s remote northern regions.

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions and Prompts

1. *How did you hear about the PAWS Your Stress program? (What initially drew you to attend?)*
2. *How did you feel before attending? (And how did that compare to how you felt afterwards?)*
3. *How would you describe your interactions? (What kind of interactions did you have? Could you describe them? Was that helpful for you? Was there anything that was not helpful for you?)*
4. *Did you have an animal of your own growing up? (Do you have one now? Did you ever feel drawn to a particular animal?)*
5. *Love and support are two program goals that have been associated with pet therapy. Were there any times you felt loved during your participation? Any times you felt supported?*
6. *How do you generally cope with stress in your life? (How do you generally cope with school related stress? What impact has the program had on your ability to cope with stress?)*
7. *Is there anything else you would like to share about the PAWS Your Stress program?*