



Effects of Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) on Social Participation of Students in Self-Contained Classrooms

Savannah Braman, OTD; Deek Cunningham, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA
 Department of Occupational Therapy | University of Alabama at Birmingham
 Stephanie Stoltzner | Hand in Paw

Introduction

Social participation is essential across ages and abilities, supporting engagement in meaningful occupations and overall well-being. Limited participation can lead to loneliness, isolation, and negative effects on physical, mental, and cognitive health.

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is a promising approach shown to reduce anxiety and improve attention, cooperation, and calmness (NIH, 2018; Pandey et al., 2024). While research remains limited, early evidence suggests positive outcomes for students in self-contained classrooms.

This project partnered with Hand in Paw, a nonprofit organization in Birmingham, AL, that provides free AAT services in schools and other community setting. Hand in Paw therapy teams delivered classroom visits while the researcher conducted observations.

Purpose: To examine the effects of AAT on the social participation of students in self-contained classrooms.

Methods

Site and Population

Observations were conducted at three schools in the greater Birmingham area (two elementary and one intermediate). Participants included 16 students (ages 6-12) in self-contained classrooms, with four to seven students per class.

Research Design

This was a quantitative, observational study. Each classroom was observed once per month for two months, for a total of two sessions per class.

Recruitment

There was no formal recruitment process. A convenience sample was used from classrooms already participating in Hand in Paw's AAT programs.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through in-person observation of students' social participation during animal-assisted therapy (AAT) visits. Analysis involved simple quantitative methods, comparing first and second visits within each class and identifying trends across classrooms.

Results



Discussion

Findings of Study

- Variability in social participation was observed, with many students demonstrating increased engagement.
- Emerging patterns indicate AAT may support opportunities for social interaction for students in self-contained classrooms.

Study Limitations

- Variability in AAT visit duration across classrooms made it difficult for comparisons.
- Observer-to-student ratio limitations made it difficult at times to obtain accurate data.
- Findings are not generalizable to the entire population due to small sample size.

Conclusion

Implications

- Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) aligns with OT's 2030 Vision pillars and should therefore be considered a viable intervention approach for occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs).
- OTPs and other healthcare professionals should consider integrating AAT into traditional settings to optimize social participation outcomes.

Future Research

- Refine current set up and replicate the study.
- Examine AAT within other age groups, diagnoses, and typically developing children and adolescents.
- Assess AAT as a supplemental service within OT.
- Explore mechanisms influencing AAT's outcomes (i.e., regulation, motivation).

References

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Acknowledgement & Contact information

A special thanks to Stephanie Stoltzner, Dr. Cunningham, and the Hand in Paw organization for their guidance and support throughout this experience.

Savannah Braman | savann4h@uab.edu