



The Inclusion of Animals in Educational Settings: The Educators' Perspective

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Abstract The inclusion of animals within educational settings is not a new phenomenon, although the last several decades have certainly seen a growth in popularity. Despite increased uptake, little is known about the ways animals are typically being included within educational settings, and the nature of sessions that are being undertaken. The aim of this qualitative study was to explore, from the perspectives of educators, the general risks and benefits to both students and animals of including animals in schools, the types of activities undertaken, species included and their associated management, and the perceived impact on both students and animals. Fourteen educators from UK primary, secondary, and special (schools for children with additional educational needs) schools participated in semistructured online interviews. To assist in the creation of a cohesive narrative from the dialogues generated, interview data were analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach. Substantial variation was noted regarding the way sessions were structured, their goals, and anticipated outcomes. Despite the variations in delivery, educators felt the inclusion of animals within school had a positive impact on students, specifically student well-being. A key concern highlighted from the interviews was the lack of guidance and support for educational settings regarding the undertaking, general management, and regulation of the animals. To ensure the safe and effective inclusion of animals in educational settings, collaborative support from a range of stakeholders including educators, policy makers, and animal welfare charities is necessary.

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Introduction

A wealth of research has demonstrated the positive impact of the inclusion of animals for therapeutic interventions outside of educational settings. Therefore, it seems a natural progression to include animals within educational settings to support educational goals (Gee et al., 2015). However, while a variety of animals and in particular dogs (Brelsford et al., 2017) are now currently included in educational settings, the perceived impact of and reasoning behind this has not been robustly explored (Brelsford et al., 2017). To date, much of the research has focused predominantly on the students' experiences, overlooking animal welfare (Bidoli et al., 2022). In this study we interviewed educators to explore how animals are currently included in educational settings to support the agenda of providing best practice guidance (Bassette & Taber-Doughty, 2016).

First, there is a need to be clear with terminology when considering the inclusion of animals in educational settings. In collaboration with 100 professionals, Howell et al. (2022) aimed to address the interchangeable use of terminology and create a consensus. Utilizing their definition, animals who are in an educational setting to support children via goal-directed structured programs or services, such as reading programs or improving life skills, are defined as *educational/school support animals* (Howell et al., 2022). Additionally, animals in educational settings may also be considered *visiting animals* or *therapy animals* depending on their role within a setting. Therapy animals' "work" is a form of animal-assisted intervention (AAI). AAI are goal-oriented interventions with a therapeutic gain for the human involved (Jalongo et al., 2004). For the role of therapy animal, the animal must work with a qualified professional within a goal-directed therapy treatment to support someone's mental health or well-being, whereas a visiting animal is an animal within an educational setting that is there for enjoyment purposes. An animal in an educational setting could therefore be there for a number of reasons, such as to enrich the school environment, to bring a curriculum topic to life, for student well-being and motivation purposes

(Gee et al., 2015). The number of different definitions can add confusion, therefore for this paper we are using Howell et al.'s (2022) terms to understand the inclusion of animals in educational settings.

Previous research has reported the positive impact of the inclusion of animals, but a mixed picture of implementation (Brelsford et al., 2017). Brelsford et al.'s (2017) systematic review found that in some studies, dogs were certified as therapy dogs (Gee et al., 2007, 2009; Gee, Church et al., 2010; Gee, Crist et al., 2010; Gee, Belcher et al., 2012; Gee, Gould et al., 2012), whereas in others, an untrained school dog was used (Becker, 2014). For therapy dogs, Grové et al. (2021) reported the importance of the dog being certified to reduce any risks; however, this is not always the case. Animals were included for specific interventions or activities, whereas in other cases (e.g. Hergovich et al., 2002; Kotrschal & Ortbauer, 2003), the dog roamed the class with no focus. Brelsford et al. (2017) provide context for what Gee, Fine, and Schuck (2015) call the "underground culture," this unknown of how animals are being included in schools with one example being including animals owned by staff members that are not trained in the school setting.

When researching the inclusion of animals in educational settings, both the animal and the human recipient need to be considered. Yet, in the current literature, the focus is mainly on the human (Bidoli et al., 2022). Concerningly, across the research evidence base of animals in educational settings there is a lack of reference to a risk assessment and acknowledgment of animal welfare. Bidoli et al. (2022) highlighted serious concerns around dog welfare from observing the inclusion of privately owned (by the teacher) dogs in educational settings in Germany. The dogs were at greater risk in elementary classrooms, with over half of the sessions observed rated as problematic. This highlights the importance of focusing on animal welfare and understanding current practices around the inclusion of animals in educational settings in order to have a direct positive impact on human and animal safety.

There is no unified approach to the inclusion of animals in schools. There have been recommendations proposed in the literature such as close

supervision, all staff to be informed of interventions involving animals, all stakeholders including parents informed of the animals' inclusion, and children being taught how to interact with an animal in a way that is safe for both parties (Bidoli et al., 2022; Brelsford et al., 2017; Gee et al., 2015; Herbert & Lynch, 2017; Sandt, 2020; Uttley, 2013). However, it is not systematically known whether educational settings are using these recommendations. This emphasises the need to reach educators and understand current practices, especially with animals being included in educational settings in a wide range of approaches (Brelsford et al., 2017).

There is a current gap in knowledge of how animals are included in the educational settings (Gee et al., 2015). In this study we interviewed educators including those that did not have any experience of animals within their place of work, those that did undertake nonspecific activities with a range of different species, and those that used specific schemes such as Read to Dogs to gather a picture of how animals are included in educational settings in the UK to formalize an understanding of current practices.

Methods

Design

A favorable ethical opinion from Nottingham Trent University was given before this qualitative research commenced. Semistructured interviews were conducted online with participants due to the COVID pandemic. Two separate interview schedules were created based on the educator's experience and knowledge. For participants with current or previous experience of including animals within their workplace, the schedule included 13 guiding questions focused on topics such as motivations and application, general benefits to students and animals, session contents, barriers, session impact and support. For participants with no current or previous experiences of animals, the schedule included 10 guiding questions focusing on participants' general understanding of including animals in educational settings, potential barriers to implementation, and potential session

impact. Example interview questions are provided in the appendix.

Participants

Participants were recruited by responding to a call for participants that was sent by email to school contacts and posted on social media platforms. Participants received a £10 Amazon voucher for their participation. Fourteen educators were interviewed, with the majority being female (10), and the majority including animals in their educational setting (11 participants). Years of teaching was primarily distributed among the three categories of 6–10, 16–20, and 20+ years (all 29%). The largest percentage of participants occupied head/deputy/assistant head teaching positions (50%) with most others occupying either class teacher or assistant positions (29%). The majority of our participants were from primary school settings (50% of participants), with 29% working in a secondary school and 21% in a specialist school (these are schools for children with additional needs).

A total of 13 different species were mentioned by participants, with dogs being the most popular (81%), followed by horses/donkeys, birds, reptiles, and small mammals (e.g., rabbits and guinea pigs). Species such as cats, insects, and exotic mammals were least frequently mentioned. Animals included mostly belonged to staff members or were acquired by the school for the purposes of animal interventions, rather than via an external organization. A range of different activities was mentioned, although those involving dogs appeared more diverse and involved more social, emotional, and therapeutic elements compared to the other species mentioned.

Data Analysis

Transcript analysis followed an inductive reflexive thematic analytical approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method enabled us to generate a comprehensive list of codes and to subsequently identify key themes and subthemes from the data, creating a cohesive narrative. A mixture of both semantic and latent codes was used, depending on the authors'

interpretations of the underlying nature and meaning of the points being made by participants. This process was performed separately by the authors, who then met to review and discuss their codes and determine the underlying themes and subthemes that linked groups of codes together, establishing a unified perspective on participant narratives. Codes, themes, and subthemes were then checked against the original transcripts to ensure that they represented the data and that important aspects of participant narratives had been captured.

Findings

Dogs were by far the most popular species mentioned within our participant group, and they provided richer and more diverse social and emotional experiences for students, compared to other species. While in some cases participants talked generally about the positive impact of animals, almost all the specific examples and their details were focused on dogs. In particular, one-to-one sessions between a dog and students were seen as particularly beneficial, especially for students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). This student group often seemed to be prioritized for sessions with dogs, whereas interactions with other species seemed to be made more widely available to all students.

The nature of and benefits associated with other species (e.g., tadpoles and chicks) seemed to be focused on their general entertainment value and ability to facilitate learning about animal life cycles, development, and animal husbandry: “They love that whole process of just that egg coming alive and a real living creature coming out of the egg” (P7). These species’ differences were also reflected in the amount of detail and description provided in relation to the way dogs (versus other species) were managed, how the sessions were structured, their benefits to students, as well as concerns about their comfort and safety during sessions. In some cases, different dogs were also described as being better at or more suited to different activities (i.e., being stroked and handled versus agility) than others. For other animals, the suitability of different species was mostly discussed in relation to their general handling and husbandry within the setting.

Table 1 summarizes the themes and subthemes of the data. We discuss four themes that comprehensively explain the educator voice on the inclusion of animals in educational settings.

Animal Autonomy

An outcome of Bidoli et al.’s (2022) work was the voluntariness on the part of the dog in any dog–student interaction in a educational setting, in that the dog should have a choice over whether to participate in

Table 1. Theme Overview

Main Theme	Subtheme	Summary
Animal autonomy	<i>Animal’s consent to partake</i> <i>Expectations of animal to perform various roles</i> <i>Session structure, predictability, and flexibility</i>	This theme discusses animals’ willingness to participate in activities, roles expected of them, and the structure of activities.
Unique benefit of animal presence within school	<i>Transformative impact of a dog’s presence</i> <i>Student as teacher</i>	This theme discusses the impact of including animals on the students.
Managing inclusion of animals and its risks	<i>Perceived risks to children and animals</i> <i>Steps to mitigate risks/support student and animal comfort</i>	This theme discusses the perceived risks and steps to reduce these for students and animals.
Educator roles and responsibility	<i>Responsibility for animals, management, and implementation</i> <i>The role of school networks and personal contacts</i>	

an activity. This theme and its subthemes describe aspects of the ways animals were generally managed, considering how these might relate to animals' choice and control over their inclusion, its predictability, and the expectations that might be placed upon them by humans.

Animal Consent to Partake. No formal processes were mentioned by participants in terms of how they might try to gauge consent from animals; however, some participants described contexts involving dogs where they might have the opportunity to either “opt in” or “opt out.” One participant explained: “[The handler] always says that if they don’t want to get in the van in the morning, if they want to stay in bed at home, that’s what they do” (P9). Several participants also mentioned that the dogs they included had the option to remove themselves from sessions and to ultimately choose where they went within the school and which students they wanted to interact with: “He picks the children that he wants to sit beside. So, we maybe think that there’s a certain child that [is] going to benefit but he goes to a totally different child” (P12). This was discussed in the context of the general periods the dogs were on the school premises and their unstructured interactions with students throughout the day, rather than during specific, structured sessions.

Dogs were also generally described by the participants as being very enthusiastic in sessions, to enjoy them, and to actively participate in them, and there was the feeling that dogs would not actively participate in the sessions if they were not enjoying themselves: “They worked out how to open up the electric doors and come into [the teaching area] themselves. If they didn’t want to go into school, they wouldn’t do that at full pelt” (P9). However, Bidoli et al.’s (2022) work reported that owners were not always able to identify when their dog did not wish to engage with an activity, which may also be echoed here.

Expectations of Animal to Perform Various Roles. The animals included were often referred to by their designated role (i.e., “therapy dog”). However, many participants also mentioned that

the same dogs might often be included in a range of activities (e.g., from serving a therapeutic role to partaking in reading to dogs sessions, training, and agility), and thus in practice, some dogs might be expected to perform a series of different “roles” in a setting. In several cases dogs had been acquired by the school or a member of staff for the specific purpose of a “therapy dog,” although the dogs in question had not received any specific prior training to support this, and there seemed to be a lack of clarity over how to select a suitable dog for this role. A therapy animal must work with a qualified professional within a structured, goal-directed treatment (Howell et al., 2022). However, with participants the term “therapy dog” was used for an animal who may be performing several roles within the school. One participant described their recent experience of acquiring a dog for their school:

The head teacher came to me and he said I want to buy a dog for the school. And I said right? OK, for it to be in school permanently? So we purchased a cockapoo. And this wee dog comes into school every day with the head teacher and stays at my house once a week and he now goes into different classrooms in the school. (P6)

Another participant described their experience with their dog that they recently acquired with the understanding that the dog would be used as a “therapy dog” in a school in the future.

While there was a definite desire for participants to train their dogs to enable them to perform these roles within the setting, there also appeared to be a lack of clarity over exactly how to prepare the dog to meet the specific requirements of that role, what this role might entail, and the need for further guidance. One participant explained,

I haven’t done much reading in terms of how to best utilize her as a therapy dog. And I think if we were to undergo some training or have some key rules to follow, I think that would only better both [the dog’s] engagement with school and the students’ engagement with [the dog]. So, I think from

us being quite novices in terms of what a therapy dog actually does, I think we would actually enjoy some resources like that too to make sure we're doing right by her. So yeah, I think there's a lot of learning from us to be done from this as well. (P14)

Session Structure, Predictability and Flexibility. Where structured one-to-one sessions such as reading to a dog took place, these tended to be limited to short periods such as 15–30 minutes. When using an unstructured approach, the dogs were around students and staff for large periods of the school day, with one example given where a dog was involved in outdoor sports activities for two hours. With the exception of cases where an external organization brought dogs into the setting and delivered formal sessions, all participants talked about the benefits of being flexible, rather than specific sessions or activities being featured in regular timetabling. Students were described as being able to spend time with the animals within their classroom whenever they wanted throughout the day, rather than at set times: “We just teach a lesson and one of the boys will just get up, walk over to [the dog], give him strokes, go and sit back down again” (P9) and “I’ve seen children who’ve been upset, just sit there and just watch them jump around them” (P8).

Unique Benefit of Animal Presence Within School

The contexts in which dogs were described as providing therapeutic benefits to students, parents, and staff typically appeared to occur outside of structured sessions and as an ad hoc, real-time intervention where the need arose. For example, a dog might be brought into an emotionally challenging situation to calm students when distressed, or to diffuse tense situations with parents/guardians: “There’s been quite a few heated parent meetings in the school. And yet, when the dog has been in the same room as the meeting, he will just calm it right down” (P6).

Transformative Impact of a Dog’s Presence. Dogs in particular were perceived as facilitating

students’ general ability to communicate with and “open up” to staff as well as their parents/guardians. One participant explained:

I just remember the look on her face when she had a big fluffy dog in front of her. She completely changed character from a very kind of low point that she was at, you know, to the happiest of highs. She was, you know, answering questions that she probably wouldn’t normally do if it was just me and her one on one. (P14)

Dogs were also described as promoting emotional regulation and being sensitive to the emotional needs of students: “They know who’s upset. They know who to go and sit with. They know who wants to cuddle up to” (P9). Other participants talked about the emotional support dogs provided to vulnerable students:

We kind of have incidents where, I don’t know, the police have to come in and speak to them, or they’ve just found something out at home, or they’ve witnessed domestic abuse or something like that. And then they would go in there, they would literally just have a quiet 20 minutes and have a bit of a cry and stroke the dog, and [it] just kind of makes them feel a bit better. (P13)

Many participants talked about the ways that animals were particularly beneficial to support students with additional learning needs: “They have butterflies in there and a fish and I know that’s nothing amazing. But the difference in how her behavior was . . . it’s like the switch just went and she just calmed completely down, staying there for two hours” (P4).

The presence of animals in educational settings was described as increasing students’ enthusiasm and motivation to participate in various activities, and therefore access to animals was often used to motivate and reward students for good or desired behaviors: “We then started using the dog as a motivator for him [the student]. So if he [the student] behaved, he was allowed to take the dog for a walk.

He's never had a meltdown in 4 years since working with dogs" (P14). The presence of a dog in school was also credited with enabling a reluctant student to "gain an education," as explained by one participant: "We have certain students where they would point blank refuse to read and they would not do any work whatsoever, whereas if you brought [the dog] into the mix then it just made them engage a bit more" (P13).

Including animals in the school was also reported to increase attendance and maintain good attendance among anxious students just starting school and also reluctant attenders, especially during the pandemic. One participant explained: "The rabbit and the guinea pig are nearly always one of those things we use if a child is very distressed and doesn't want to come in" (P8). In another example a dog enabled a child to remain in school: "If we hadn't had [the dog], they [the student] would have been excluded. And permanently excluded with no doubt whatsoever. I know that emotionally he [the dog] was a great support" (P10).

Student as Teacher. The process of students perceiving they had successfully trained a dog to perform a task was thought to create a sense of achievement for students. In essence, the students were taking on the role of "teacher," building student confidence as highlighted by these participants:

The look on his face and just for the young man he was blown away that this dog was doing exactly what he wanted him to do, so that's a massive success. (P9)

He thinks he's actually doing it, but the dog's doing it for him, like, and he just follows what the dog's doing. But he's getting a sense of self-worth because he's telling us what to do and he thinks he's trained his dog to do it. (P6)

For a lot of kids where their lives are often quite out of control, it's quite nice for them to have that kind of oh look what I can do and it's a big confidence boost for them, definitely. (P13)

Managing the Inclusion of Animals and Its Risks

Perceived Risks to Students and Animals.

The size of the animal appeared to be relevant to the perceived risks associated with their inclusion, and potentially the degree to which the sessions were supervised or regulated by staff. For example, larger-sized animals such as dogs and horses seemed to be considered as potentially posing a greater risk to students, but at the same time they were perceived as less vulnerable to being mishandled themselves, compared to smaller animals such as rabbits and guinea pigs. When reflecting on a previous experience, a participant described an incident involving a student's mishandling of a rabbit:

They were petting bunny rabbits. They had them beautifully on their lap. This one child just freaked out because the rabbit moved in a peculiar way, and so she threw it on the floor and it got its leg broken. (P6)

This reduced perceived risk to students posed by smaller animals seemed to be reflected in the nature of their inclusion, with sessions potentially less closely supervised or regulated, which might in turn increase the animals' risk of being mishandled. One participant described how they had had to intervene in students' handling of the school's resident guinea pig: "I've had to speak to certain children about not treating the guinea pigs like dolls. And you know, putting them on the knee, shaking them up and down" (P8).

It seemed that, in relation to educators' perspectives of the risks, these were often focused primarily on the students and their safety: "If a child was harmed by one of the animals, that's always the top of your risk list . . . , you know" (P4), with considerations for animals being important, but often seemingly taking a second position to students. These perspectives likely reflect the student-centered nature of participants' roles in their educational setting and that in some cases activities were provided by external organizations who took on the role of managing

and being responsible for the animals. However, it might also in part be linked to the greater fear of reactions from parents and potential legal implications if an animal harmed a child. There was acknowledgment that the inclusion of animals was associated with inherent risks, and that these risks should just be mitigated as much as possible: “Always gonna be the risk of having a dog, but we’ve tried to do everything to mitigate anything that could possibly go wrong, but it’s a dog at the end of the day, isn’t it really?” (P9). Some participants considered the potential unpredictability of dogs and the risks this might pose to students most pertinent for students with additional needs. When discussing the risks, all participants focused on the students, echoing Bidoli et al. (2022) that animal welfare is secondary when including animals in educational settings.

Steps to Mitigate Risks/Support Student and Animal Comfort. Any students that were initially frightened of an animal being present were provided with slower and more careful introductions, especially with dogs.

The level of interaction with the dog was built up gradually over several sessions, and large student–dog distances applied to ensure that those students not participating still felt comfortable with having a dog on site during school hours. One participant reflected on how they had retrospectively adopted a more carefully managed approach to dog–student interactions following an incident where a dog had been brought into a classroom and had approached a student with additional needs:

So I think in the beginning we went in too fast. . . . The dog went to the child and the child got a fright. We then had to pull back and just make sure that the child was aware that the dog was coming up to them. And then just teach them how to stroke the dog gently so that the dog got used to them and they got used to the dog, because then the dog had to get his confidence built up again, and then the child just had to learn that the dog was just to be stroked and not to be grabbed and pulled. (P6)

Several participants stressed the importance of building up the dogs’ training and inclusion in sessions gradually, and not expecting too much from young or newly acquired dogs: “It’s going to be on her terms, not on, not on our terms. It’ll be when she’s ready because I don’t want to push her into something that’s that she’s not ready for” (P5).

In almost every case, participants had policies and/or risk assessments in place to cover the management and handling of animals and ensure student safety, although these seemed to be more general guidelines, rather than being specific to particular activities that might be undertaken with an animal. The internally provided (as opposed to externally provided via an organization) forms of activities with animals appeared to occur on a generally informal, unstructured basis, with specific guidelines on animal handling and interaction during sessions, session structure and content generally not mentioned. However, we did not have access to the policies and guidance documents settings had. In terms of managing structured sessions, relatively short sessions taking place in quieter areas (i.e., for 1-2-1 sessions) or larger open spaces (for larger student groups) were generally seen as favorable in order to reduce the load and stress on the dog and avoid cramped situations with lots of noise and students. One participant said:

You can’t put the dogs in with students for two hours, you know that [would] just be too much for everyone, so the dogs have their own areas where they can go and they don’t have any interaction with students. They only come out, they do this stuff, then they go away again. (P9)

Where dogs were identified as uncomfortable or an area was too busy or noisy, they were generally taken elsewhere, or greater distance was placed: “He looks uncomfortable, he gets taken away. It’s like if a classroom is too noisy, then he gets taken away and put back into the head teacher’s office” (P6). The same participant described the instructions that were given to students to help ensure the dogs’ general comfort when around students:

If he's going to a class we take the bed with us, and the bed gets put in the same place in this classroom. So if he needs to go to sleep, he goes asleep and the children know that when he's in his bed they're not allowed to interact with them.

Educator Roles and Responsibility

Responsibility for Animals, Management, and Implementation. In all cases, the process of including an animal occurred due to the participant (or their colleague) having a specific personal interest in this, and therefore taking on the associated responsibility. This responsibility included the sourcing of animals, their costs, care, management, and training when in and out of school, in addition to seeking out the necessary knowledge, training, and skills to support this. The time and financial costs faced by participants and lack of sufficient support from external organizations were generally discussed as barriers. The responsibility of taking care of resident animals was discussed as a burden on staff members: "It's a big responsibility" (P12). In contrast, other participants highlighted the benefits of bringing their own dogs into school as it created a feasible dog ownership scenario for them that would not have been possible otherwise due to long working hours:

We always wanted a dog, but we knew that we would not really have time to look after dogs. We both work full time unless we would be able to take her into school with us to do . . . kind of pets as therapy and that idea. (P13)

Participants mentioned having conducted their own research and of the importance of selecting animals with the "right" attributes. However, it was unclear whether participants were aware of what this might entail at the practical level, such as what the "right" attributes were or how to look for them, or the type of training or support an animal might need to prepare them for their anticipated "roles." For example, one participant explained about the size, breed, and temperament of the dog being important

characteristics, but this appeared to be informed by stereotypes rather than research evidence:

I think she's, you know she'll be the right temperament and the right sort of dog, and labs are so loyal and so, so loving and so. They're just, they're lovely dogs, labs. (P5)

The Role of School Networks and Personal Contacts.

Participants' personal and professional contacts and school networks appeared to play a central role in why schools wanted to include an animal. These contacts helped with the acquisition of animals for these purposes and shared materials and resources around guidance documents and risk assessments. One participant explained how in their capacity as a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) they had recommended that a school acquire a dog to help support students with SEND: "We came across one school in particular. . . . We recommended to get a therapy dog to this school and they did in the end . . . get a therapy dog. . . . They are a school where behavior is a massive challenge" (P5). Another participant described how they intended to acquire a "therapy dog" for their school in the future based on the recommendation from a head teacher at another school: "He's saying it's literally shot through the roof, he said, and the research has shown that it's having a really good impact. So that was another tick. Yes, that's the way forward" (P14). These informal networks appeared to be a key source of information for schools: "Again, I want to talk to all the different schools that have got therapy dogs and to find out what they do" (P5).

However, there are limitations to personal contacts and school networks if evidence-based information and guidance is not being shared. In general, it was apparent that there was a strong desire among most participants to include animals in a safe and responsible way, which ultimately provided benefits to both students and the animals: "We wanted to make sure that we kind of were doing it for the right reasons and making sure that obviously [the dog] enjoyed it. And also that the kids enjoy it as well" (P13). In this

regard, many participants mentioned their desire for greater access to advice and materials, and having tried to reach out to, or previously engaged with, various animal welfare organizations for information to support that received from personal contacts. One participant described their difficulties in getting support via a school therapy dog organization they had found online: “Now I’ve contacted them four times now in the last term and they have not got back to me. I’ve rang the phone numbers, but it is out of access so I am going to keep chasing them” (P5).

It seemed that participants generally felt that many of these organizations presented barriers rather than solutions to include animals in their settings. For example, certain animal rehoming/welfare organizations were described by participants as being opposed to the inclusion of animals and would therefore not offer any support or guidance. One participant described their attempts to work with such an organization during the development of their dog-centered curriculum:

Even though I tried talking to the education department [within the welfare organization], saying, you know, let’s work together, let’s do something that dogs are gonna go into schools across the country, let’s have something that’s quite uniformed and perhaps, and some benchmarks, some policy, policies that we can all have so we don’t have any Joe Bloggs just buying a dog and [bringing] it into school. But they were not having it at all. They didn’t want to work with me at all. (P9)

These positions of the rehoming/welfare organizations ultimately did not seem to have deterred participants. Rather, participants then felt it necessary to seek out (potentially less ideal) solutions to facilitate it:

We found a rabbit that we thought would be fantastic. But when the [rehoming organization] found out that it was coming into schools, they said it wasn’t allowed to come into schools because it would be too stressed. So that was the end of that. So I then had to get one in another way, so I got guinea pigs because I thought maybe you’ve

got a point. Maybe the rabbits will be stressed. Guinea pigs might be better, so I actually bought two guinea pigs off Gumtree. (P8)

In another instance, a participant could not have their dog assessed as a therapy dog through a preferred organization, due to the raw-based diet they were currently feeding the dog, and therefore indicated they would try with a different organization where they knew the diet would not be an issue. Similarly, one organization didn’t allow people to include their own dog in their own workplace.

Other participants seemed to feel that it was easier and quicker just to bring their existing dog into school or personally acquire one, rather than go through official channels or organizations, due to the long waiting lists or lack of response when contacted. Participants expressed their desire for centralized resources and support to facilitate the inclusion of animals in educational settings in different forms to reduce current conflicting messages across different organizations:

There are just lots of different things out there, so I think actually, knowing where to go and actually having somewhere to pull all of that information together would be very helpful, and because there is also some kind of conflicting messages in terms of sessions that you can do and how to, you know, have a therapy pet at school and things like that. So uhm, yeah, I think just actually having things in a, in a kind of central place, with standard guidelines across all of them and all the different companies would be helpful. (P13)

Others mentioned the need for greater regulation: “I do believe it’s gotta have a governance and I think at the moment there’s no governance in place, so it’s a bit of a free for all, which worries me a lot” (P9). Other participants suggested that this regulation would be useful if provided by the official education governing body:

I would like to see something almost from the Department of Education. They’re recognizing

the benefits of animals in school, great, bring out some guidance, bring out some set policies that each school adheres to so that there's consistency to safeguard nervous children but also the animals as well. (P10)

Several participants shared their concerns over the growing popularity of having dogs in schools and the lack of sufficient support for schools, or the regulation of individuals currently providing support:

It worries me that there's a massive big push on dogs being in schools, and I think there's a lot of people doing it for what they perceived to be the right reason, but haven't perhaps got the knowledge or the support to do it. And I'm just like, something horrible is going to happen. I think something really, really bad is going to happen. (P9)

These were concerning discussions with participants that highlight the need to understand how animals are being included in the school setting, provide governance around the inclusion, and offer support to schools if the popularity increases.

Discussion

In this paper we explored the perspectives of educators on the inclusion of animals within their educational setting. The interviews focused on barriers, risks, and benefits of the inclusion of animals, perceived impact of activities, and structure of activities. The animals overall were perceived to have a positive impact in the school setting, not only for students but staff and parents also. Similarly to Brelsford et al. (2017), the animals were typically utilized for a specific group of students and used to motivate or modify behavior or to support a pupil's well-being. Educators talked about animals having a calm presence in the school.

From the interviews, the structure and management of activities varied across the educators interviewed, thus making the "underground culture" difficult to define and outline (Gee et al., 2015). Our

study is small in scale but highlights from a small number of educators the variation in practices. In particular, dogs who were considered therapy dogs were expected to perform a number of roles under this disguise. Participants mentioned dogs partaking in well-being sessions, reading sessions, training, and agility. Participants who spoke of having a therapy dog were not clear on the roles the dog undertook in the school environment to provide therapeutic support. One participant mentioned they needed to read up on how to include a dog within their setting as a therapy dog. In some cases, these dogs also had not completed the necessary training or certification by an external body, reflecting the findings of Grové et al. (2021). These roles also do not reflect Howell et al.'s (2022) definition of a therapy dog. Instead, these dogs are visiting animals or educational/school support animals. Therefore, teacher awareness on the inclusion of animals and the structures needed for the different types of inclusion is limited (Bidoli et al., 2022).

Perceived risk of including animals in an educational setting focused on the students with the animal taking second priority, echoing the work of Bidoli et al. (2022). Participants mentioned relying on their networks to develop their risk assessments due to a lack of guidance and resources available. To mitigate risks, participants mentioned slowly introducing the animal to the setting and not expecting too much from them when first introduced into the school setting. From discussions, the risks assessments completed appeared to be general rather than specific, not considering the structure and content of sessions and management of interactions during the session; however, we did not have access to copies of risk assessments. Furthermore, school networks appear to add to the increase of the inclusion of dogs, with schools recommending including a dog for student and staff well-being. To address this, it is recommended further research work with educators to co-create guidance and a training program for schools to complete before including an animal in their setting.

A clear conclusion of this work, which adds to the previous literature, is that clear practical guidelines

are needed (Brelsford et al., 2017; Gee et al., 2015; Grové et al., 2021). Brelsford et al. (2017) recommended that all sessions be supervised, all staff trained, dogs certified, and students taught how to interact with the animal. From the interviews, there were variations in the implementation of these recommendations. Depending on the species of animal, there were differences in supervision, sharing knowledge on how to interact with the animal and all staff being knowledgeable. We noted speciesism, in that smaller animals were deemed less of a risk compared to dogs, therefore were monitored less. For all animals there was a lack of reference to a risk assessment and consideration of the animal's welfare. The educators felt, for example, dogs could make the choice to not engage with the session, such as by walking away or leaving the classroom. This does not consider the potential desire of dogs to acquiesce to, or cooperate with, the requests of their owner or handler, even if this involves engaging in an activity that is not inherently beneficial or directly pleasurable to the dog. Therefore, educators need to be trained on how to work with their pet dog to consider their choice when being included in an activity (Bidoli et al., 2022).

Fourteen educators were interviewed for the project, which is a small number, and although not the aim of the qualitative approaches, it does not enable us to generalize. It does, however, enable us to capture current practices across a number of settings and add to a body of literature regarding the inclusion of animals in school settings. Despite the different educational settings, there are commonalities across the settings, highlighting issues such as a lack of clear guidance on practices across the sector. The only guidance available to schools focuses on animals for teaching, assistance dogs, and visiting animals, not the permanent residences of an animal (Grové et al., 2021). As mentioned by a participant, "before something bad is going to happen," there is a need to move forward with developing clear guidance and resources for schools on the inclusion of a permanent animal on the school site to ensure the welfare of all parties, with educators being part of the process to ensure it is fit for the purpose.

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Appendix: Interview Schedule

1. What do you consider to be the main perceived barriers, risks and also benefits to the use of AAI schemes in UK schools?
2. The impact of AAI on children's learning and reading ability.
3. How are AAI sessions, such as reading to dogs, typically structured, and how do schools currently manage the safety and well-being of both children and dogs during sessions?
 1. Can you tell me what AAI you use in your school?
 - Read2Dog
 - School farm
 2. Can you tell me how you started to use AAI in your school? What were the reasons?
 - Pupil benefit
 - Positive response from other schools
 - News promoting Read2Dog schemes
 3. What do you use these schemes for and what animals are included?
 - Different species of animals that have been involved in the AAI sessions
 - Activities they have been included in (i.e., reading to, handling, petting, grooming, feeding, taking for a walk, generally caring for, observing from a distance, or no specific activity)
 - Pupil recruitment—selection from the pupil population
 4. COVID-19 aside, how do you think the AAI/Read2Dog scheme has gone in your school?
 - Any difficulties?
 - § School staff
 - § Setting up the scheme
 - § Animal welfare

- Any barriers?
 - § Cost
 - § Insurance
- Perceived benefits?
 - § Specific children
- 5. Do you feel there might be any benefits of AAI sessions to children in your school?
 - Mental health and well-being
 - Confidence
 - Relaxation
 - Learning and concentration
 - How do you evidence these benefits?
 - § Observations
 - § Data collected
- 6. Policy and practice—what structures do you have in place to run AAI in school? What do these policies detail? How were they developed? Did you use any guidance available to schools?
 - Dog school policy?
 - Guidance for parents
 - Guidance for children
 - Risk assessment
 - Who knows about these guidance documents in the school? Is it just the school staff working on the scheme?
- 7. Children and the animals
 - How are the animals introduced to the children?
 - What are children told about how to work with the animals?
 - What interactions does a child have with an animal?
 - § Walking on lead?
 - § Giving a treat?
 - Is there specific training for the children? For example, spot distress in the dog in their body language?
 - § If so, who delivers this and where to get their information from?
- 8. Animal welfare in school settings
 - When we say animal welfare what does this mean for you?
 - In a session what behaviors have you noticed from the animal and what do you think they mean?
 - § Yawning
 - § Ears pricked
 - § Wagging tail
 - § Licking the children
 - § Excessive panting
 - How is the welfare of the animal catered for?
 - If students touch the dog, how is this managed?
 - Who is responsible for the welfare of the animal in the setting?
 - What resources are made available to the animal?
 - § Dog water and blanket
 - § Food
- 9. Any other thoughts or points you would like to make?