Canines and Kids:

An Exploration of Children's and Adults' Perspectives on a Canine-Assisted Reading Program for Elementary School Students

A Division III Project by Abigail Brownell
Acknowledgements

Thank you, Mom, Dad, Brooke, Brian, and London, for always encouraging me and inspiring me to do what I love.

Thank you, Rachel Conrad and Sarah Partan, for your invaluable positivity, guidance, feedback, and support throughout this entire process. From all of your constructive comments on the many drafts of my work to your words of encouragement that have motivated me in times of uncertainty, I am so appreciative of the time and care that you both have invested throughout the development of this project.

Thank you, Melissa Kielbasa, for all of your generosity that has made this project possible. I am truly inspired by the work that you do in the community and am honored to have been given the opportunity to take a closer look at “Read to Rover” and to share its greatness with others.

Thank you to all of the child and adult participants for your time and willingness to share your experiences in our interviews. Each one of your voices has been fundamental to this project and through listening to your voices I have learned so much.

Thank you to the school members who allowed me to conduct my research in such a warm and welcoming community.

Thank you to all of the two- and four-legged members of “K-9’s for Kids” for putting smiles on so many children’s faces.

Thank you, Bridget and Charles, for being such wonderful friends. Thank you for always lending a listening ear, for filling me with strength and laughter, and for pulling me away from my work when you knew I needed it.

Lastly, thank you to my Willow. Sometimes all I need is to give you a hug and to be met by your unconditional love. You, and all of the family dogs, have been at the heart of this project.
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Abstract

This qualitative study explores children’s and adults’ experiences with a canine-assisted reading program for students in a Western Massachusetts elementary school. Although previous research has revealed many physiological, social, emotional, and academic benefits of canine-assisted therapy for children, few studies have thoroughly investigated children’s and adults’ perspectives on these programs. By conducting interviews with four elementary-aged children who were receiving canine-assisted reading services at their school and five adults who were involved in the process as either teachers or dog handlers, the present study aims to begin to fill the gap in the existing literature. A thematic analysis of these interviews reveals the various positive aspects that the child and adult participants reported about the canine-assisted reading program, including: helping to develop reading skills and confidence, fostering a sense of comfort and connection, and viewing the program as a special part of the school culture. By attending to individual children’s and adults’ reports of their experiences with the canine-assisted reading program, this study expands our current knowledge of the field and provides evidence for the beneficial effects of a canine-assisted reading program for children.
Chapter 1: Literature Review

In recent years, considerable research has revealed the various social, emotional, physiological, and academic benefits of canine-assisted therapy for children. However, much of this literature does not delve into children’s perspectives on the subject or into their personal experiences with canine-assisted programs. This gap in the existing literature has inspired my research, and in the present paper I will explore how a canine-assisted reading program is experienced by young people in their elementary school and by adults who are involved in this process. By interviewing child and adult participants, I will investigate their personal stories and perspectives regarding a canine-assisted reading program, and will discuss whether pediatric therapy dogs can be considered beneficial members of an elementary school community.

This exploratory qualitative study will open with a comprehensive literature review that investigates numerous topics to provide an important background for my research. From here, I will describe the methodologies for my study, and in the following chapter, I will offer a thematic analysis of my interviews with the child and adult participants regarding their experiences with a canine-assisted reading program. Finally, in my Discussion chapter, I will draw conclusions from my research and will consider the implications that these findings may have on the development of the field of canine-assisted therapy for young people.

I will begin my literature review with a discussion on the history and nature of human-dog relationships, and will move on to investigate research on dogs’ sensitivity towards humans, both of which are critical to consider when thinking about a dog’s role in therapy for children. From here, the impacts that animals can have on children’s lives will be explored, and a thorough discussion regarding the existing literature on canine-assisted therapy for children will be presented. Lastly, I will describe the importance of including children’s voices in research about
young people, an element of the research on canine-assisted therapy that has yet to be thoroughly explored.

**Background on Human-Dog Relationships**

During the dog’s domestication alongside humans over the last 10,000 years, the two species have developed complex relationships with one another (Galibert et al., 2011; Nagasawa et al., 2009b). Whether dogs were being bred for guarding, hunting, or herding purposes, as they were in the past, or as companion animals, therapy dogs, or drug-sniffing dogs as they are in many Western cultures today, the various roles of the domesticated dog have always involved a close relationship with humans. In order to explore canine-assisted therapy in detail throughout the following sections, a discussion of the characteristics and effects of the human-dog bond is critical and provides important background information that grounds many of the topics that will be addressed in this paper.

**Types of Human-Dog Relationships**

Many dog owners believe that in addition to supporting their pet by providing them with food, shelter, and care, they also personally gain something by having a dog (Coppinger & Coppinger, 2001). Along these lines, Nagasawa et al. (2009b) claim that dogs have evolved a unique and cooperative relationship with humans through the process of domestication and as a result, humans have developed an emotional bond with their pet dogs. Thus, they discuss how the human-dog bond is a cooperative relationship that has mental and physical benefits for humans.

While the reasons why this beneficial human-dog relationship exists are not definitively understood, Nagasawa et al. (2009b) provide a discussion that attempts to make sense of this
phenomenon. First, they put forth a claim originally made by James Serpell, who, according to Nagasawa et al. (2009b), stated: “humans develop positive feelings and behavior while caring for dogs because a bond similar to that in human mother-infant relationships can be formed between humans and dogs” (p. 210). For instance, research (which will be discussed in detail later) has shown that oxytocin, a key mediator for bonding between infants and mothers, is increased in pet owners after interactions with their pet dog (Horowitz, 2008; Nagasawa et al., 2009a). Nagasawa et al. (2009b) also explore the idea of the human-dog bond as an attachment relationship, due to the possibility that dogs and humans may share similar attachment styles, whereas most animals display species-specific attachment styles. Accordingly, this attachment relationship can have a positive influence on humans both psychologically and physiologically. The authors claim that research has shown that “not only owning dogs, but also the degree of attachment that humans have toward dogs, is linked to human health, wellbeing, and the development of positive feelings” (Nagasawa et al., 2009b, p. 210). In this respect, Nagasawa et al.’s (2009b) argument regarding the emotional attachment and positive relationships between humans and dogs appears analogous to the way in which many pet owners understand these bonds.

However, within the belief that the human-dog bond is mutually beneficial, it is easy to exclude other kinds of relationships that humans might have with dogs, both individually and cross-culturally. In *Dogs*, Coppinger and Coppinger (2001) question the commonly held view that the relationship between dogs and humans is of mutual benefit to both species by taking on the ecological perspective and discussing four types of symbiotic relationships and relating each to the human-dog association. Coppinger and Coppinger (2001) first discuss commensalism, a relationship that is good for one species but does nothing for the other, and related this to the millions of dogs around the world scavenging the dumps of villages, and thus benefitting from
living close to people while the humans receive little or no benefit in return. They then explain *mutualism*, which again, is a relationship that mutually benefits both species, and claimed that while some of the associations between dogs and people may be mutually beneficial, such as humans’ relationships with service or working dogs, many are not. Thirdly, the authors discuss *parasitism*, a relationship where one organism benefits at the expense of the other, and related this to the domestic housedog in that many pet dogs cost more to their owners than they give back. Lastly, they introduce *amensalism*, a relationship where one species hurts the other, often unknowingly and without benefit to itself, and state that this can be displayed through associations between dogs and humans. For instance, pure breeds might experience detriments of inbreeding by humans, which would undoubtedly be harmful for dogs and seemingly non-beneficial for humans.

Within this discussion on the various types of relationships that humans can have with dogs, Coppinger and Coppinger (2001) do not align with one specific view. Rather, they offer this perspective as a method to better understand the range of ways in which humans and dogs interact, since “Mutualism is only one quarter of the story” (Coppinge and Coppinger, 2001, p. 27). However, the authors admit that their argument is oftentimes disagreed with and not favored by dog owners and other scholars, perhaps because of its more objective nature. Nonetheless, their analysis of the human-dog association is useful and provides an insightful perspective on the relationships that may exist between the two species. This is especially critical to recognize when considering the range of cultural and individual attitudes towards dogs, since the commonly held “mutualistic” perspective that exists in the United States and Europe may not necessarily be representative of every culture.
Cultural and Individual Attitudes towards Dogs

Throughout this chapter, the perception that the human-dog bond is of mutual benefit will drive a majority of the research to be explored, in part because much of this research has been conducted by North American and European scholars who are investigating human-dog associations in Western cultures. However, in order to create an inclusive background on the subject, cultural and individual attitudes towards dogs must also be briefly investigated. Despite differences in the nature of human-dog relationships across cultures and between individuals, both historically and presently, humans and domesticated dogs are associated in nearly all parts of the world (Knobel, Laurenson, Kazwala, Boden, & Cleaveland, 2008). While in much of North America and Europe dogs are viewed as social companions, this is not the case in many other areas of the world, as dogs are seen in drastically different ways, both positively and negatively. In many areas, the domesticated dog population differs greatly from what most people living in the United States are familiar with. For instance, of the estimated 500 million dogs worldwide, 75 percent of those dogs are ownerless, free-ranging, “street” or “village dogs” (WSPA, 2011). Additionally, in many areas where free-ranging dogs thrive, these animals pose significant health risks to humans, which can greatly impact the way in which they are viewed (Knobel, 2008). The fact that the bond that many people in the United States believe they hold with dogs is not representative of the human-dog association around the world is important to remember. Thus, the unique relationship between children and dogs that will be explored in my study reveals just one way in which dogs and humans interact.

According to Knobel et al. (2008), “Reasons for keeping or tolerating dogs vary across societies and may involve aspects of security, companionship, transport, food acquisition or religious beliefs” (p. 1). For instance, dogs have historically and presently been considered food
items in certain cultures throughout various parts of the world, in a similar way that domesticated chickens and pigs are viewed as livestock in the United States and Europe (Serpell, 1995). Additionally, in much of southern Asia, “street dogs” are viewed as unclean based on religious proscriptions. However, this view is not necessarily representative of all communities or individuals living in this particular region (Serpell, 1995). For example, the Lisu people, a mountain tribe from Thailand, tolerate free roaming dogs because in their mythology the dog is regarded as a hero (Serpell, 1995). Thus, while a given area of the world may maintain a general attitude towards dogs that differs from other parts of the world, within these regions may be groups of people or individuals whose views challenge the dominant perspective. Therefore, it is important to recognize that within cultures and communities, individual attitudes towards dogs may also exist on a broad spectrum.

Many factors may influence an individual’s attitude towards dogs, such as previously owning a pet dog versus never having owned a pet dog, or associating positive or negative memories and experiences with dogs. For example, in a study that assessed attitudes towards dogs among children and adults in several European countries, both children and adults who owned dogs were found to have a more positive attitude towards dogs than children and adults who did not own dogs (Lakestani, Donaldson, Verga, & Waran, 2011). Beyond this, however, is the reality that all of the participants who were surveyed have their own stories that influenced the way in which they answered each question. To support this notion, another study investigated the origins of children’s and adults’ fear of dogs, and the researchers discovered that of the 25 adults who reported having a high fear of dogs, only four had been bitten, whereas 25 of the 75 adults who reported no fear of dogs had been previously bitten (Doogan & Thomas, 1992). This helps to reveal the complexity of individuals’ attitudes towards dogs, in that a harmful
experience, such as a dog bite, does not necessarily determine how someone views dogs in general. Similarly, even while 10 of the 11 children who reported having a high fear of dogs and 7 of the 10 children who reported a low fear of dogs cited having at least one frightening encounter with a dog, every child involved in the study still reported being happy to approach a friendly dog (Doogan & Thomas, 1992). Much like with the adult participants, this displays that a negative experience with a dog may not be the sole factor in determining someone’s attitude towards the species. Rather, attitudes towards dogs are built from a variety of personal and familial histories. The fact that individuals vary in their perspectives on dogs is critical to remember throughout the discussions to follow. While generalizability is important to much research, in this paper I will continuously emphasize the importance of considering individual perspectives, specifically in relation to my study and its focus on children’s and adults’ unique and valuable perspectives on a canine-assisted therapy program.

**Research on Dogs’ Sensitivity towards Humans**

Given the various types of associations that humans and dogs can have with one another, both culturally and individually, it is important to now provide a discussion that gives insight into how and why this mutually beneficial bond exists in such a way that many people identify with in the United States and Europe. Research on the dog’s sensitivity to human behavior will be explored, specifically in relation to their perhaps unique ability to interpret and use human-like social skills as well as their human-directed emotional sensitivity. By analyzing several studies and perspectives on these topics, I will build an argument that reveals the complexity in understanding the exact nature of the dog’s immense sensitivity to human behavior, which will
provide a useful background to then discuss children’s bonds with dogs and their psychological and physiological responses to dogs.

**Dogs’ Human-Like Social Skills**

In a 2005 article by Hare and Tomasello, the authors provide evidence to support their claim that the dog’s visual cognitive ability is unique and superior to that of their wild ancestor, the wolf, and to that of apes, particularly with respect to understanding human gaze and pointing gestures and using human-like gazing as a communication skill. They explain that not only do dogs use human pointing gestures as a means to find hidden food, but that dogs also *selectively use* human gaze to locate hidden food. In this respect, dogs in research contexts have been found to use a person’s head and eye direction cue only if they are gazing directly at one of two possible hiding locations, and will ignore this gaze if that person randomly stares elsewhere. Furthermore, when faced with difficulties, dogs have been observed initiating triadic communicative interactions by either looking at a human partner or by alternating their gaze between the human and an object in an attempt to resolve the problem (Hare & Tomasello, 2005; Horn, Virányi, Miklósi, Huber, & Range, 2012). For example, when a tennis ball rolls under a couch and is inaccessible to a dog, they will likely repeatedly look to their owner and then to the area of the hidden ball, as a means to retrieve the ball. Thus, as Hare and Tomasello (2005) discuss, not only do dogs *interpret* human social skills such as pointing, but they also *display a use* of communicative skills typically seen only among primates.

A critical question to then ask is: where do these specialized skills come from? To investigate this question, researchers have conducted studies on both dogs and their wolf ancestors in an attempt to tease apart the dog’s supposed unique sensitivity to human behavior.
Interestingly, when faced with a similar scenario to the hidden object task, wolves have been observed to try to resolve the issue on their own, rather than look to a human for help (Hare & Tomasello, 2005; Horn et al., 2012). Hare and Tomasello (2005) propose three explanations for the dog’s human-like social skills and sensitivity to human social and communicative behaviors. The first hypothesis claims that the dog’s ability to read human social cues is a learned behavior and that dogs are sensitive to human behaviors simply because they grow up with humans and learn through observation. However, the authors reject this hypothesis because research with puppies has revealed that dogs do not need unusual amounts of exposure to humans in order to read their social and communicative behaviors, since puppies as young as nine weeks old and puppies with little socialization with humans were nearly perfect at basic pointing and gazing tests. A second explanation suggests that the dog’s exhibited social skills are merely inherited through common descent with wolves, which are social pack animals that depend on reading their conspecifics’ social behavior for their survival. Hare and Tomasello (2005) again refute this hypothesis since some research has found that wolves are not as skilled as dogs at reading human social behaviors and therefore, the two species simply differ in their proficiency and use of these skills. Their third hypothesis, which Hare and Tomasello (2005) claim to be the most accurate explanation, states that dogs have evolved these social skills during the process of 10,000 to 15,000 years of domestication alongside humans, which has allowed for this close and unique relationship between the two species that persists today.

However, Udell et al. (2012) claim that more research must be done that further explores dogs’ and other canids’ abilities to read human social cues before a solid conclusion can be drawn about the evolutionary origins of social sensitivity in pet dogs. In their research, they found that canid responsiveness to human stimuli is less restricted than previously thought, in
that wolves have the capacity to respond to a wide range of human gestures and that human-socialized coyotes also demonstrated some level of responsiveness. Thus, Udell et al. (2012) discuss that when canids are human-socialized and are tested in a more comparable manner to domesticated dogs, they often perform very well and at times, even better than dogs on human guided tasks.

Similarly, in reference to the research done by Hare and Tomasello, researcher Clive Wynne stated in an interview that:

[Hare and Tomasello] argued that dogs have the special ability, a unique ability, to understand what people are up to. I don’t deny that the dog is different from the wolf. The pet dog that you have in your home, I don’t deny for a moment that it has an exquisite degree of sensitivity to its owner that you wouldn’t easily find in another animal. But I don’t believe that the two things are tightly linked. I don’t think that in the process of domestication that the dog acquired special brain power. (Cited in Homans, 2012, pp. 89-90)

Thus, instead of believing that the dog has acquired special skills to understand human behavior, Wynne later claimed that the crucial difference between wolves and dogs is the dog’s long, neotenized, or juvenilized, period of socialization that has resulted from the dog’s domestication, which allows dogs to bond with humans in ways that wolves cannot (Homans, 2012). In their interview, Wynne went on to discuss that once the dog has imprinted on humans and develops a dependency on its owner for all of its essential survival needs, associative learning and conditioning begins, which is the reason for dog’s responsiveness to human’s social behaviors (Homans, 2012). This view is similar to the first hypothesis that was proposed and rejected by Hare and Tomasello (2005), which states that dogs are sensitive to human behaviors because they grow up with humans and learn through observation. Thus, it becomes apparent that these researchers hold explanations and conclusions that are not necessarily perfectly in line with one
another. Even still, within all of their discussions is the undeniable theme that dogs do present some extent of sensitivity towards human behavior, and I do not believe that any one hypothesis can be declared as being the sole influence. Rather, the three hypotheses raised by Hare and Tomasello (2005) should be taken collectively, and together they can help explain the dog’s sensitivity to human behaviors.

**Dogs’ Human-Directed Emotional Sensitivity**

Many pet owners frequently extend their assumptions of the dog’s sensitivity to human behavior to include dogs’ understanding of human emotions. In this respect, many people commonly claim that dogs are “well-tuned” to our emotions, that they “know how we feel,” or that they have a “sixth sense” about us. This attitude on the human-dog relationship is a perspective that does not seem to guide the work done by Coppinger and Coppinger (2001) or Udell et al. (2012), whose discussions are much more parsimonious and arguably less anthropomorphic. Nonetheless, this concept of dogs’ human-directed emotional sensitivity must also be considered in the discourse about the bond between domesticated dogs and people, particularly because it is such a widely held view among dog owners.

In 2012, Custance and Mayer explored the concept of empathic-like responding in dogs in a study that exposed 18 different pet dogs from different families, who ranged in age, breed, and past experiences (some were rescues, others were obtained as puppies from breeders, etc.) to the following four different experimental conditions: (1) their owner cried; (2) a stranger cried; (3) their owner hummed; (4) the same stranger hummed. Both the owners and the stranger were instructed to pretend cry during the crying condition and to loudly hum “Mary Had a Little Lamb” during the humming condition. They were instructed to make all of the same body
gestures during both of the conditions and to not interact with the dog at any point during the sessions. All of the sessions took place in the living room of the owner’s home, where the owner was always present, so that the dogs were most likely to behave in a natural manner. During the stranger conditions, the owners sat in close proximity and acted as a “silent witness,” and during the owner conditions, the stranger was the “silent witness.” Each condition lasted 20 seconds and they were separated with two minutes during which the owner and stranger talked. The entire session for each dog was video recorded and examined for behavioral analysis, which included coding for person-oriented behaviors and non-person-oriented behaviors. The person-oriented behaviors included: looking at the person, physically contacting the person (licking, nudging, etc.), and approaching the person. The non-person-oriented behaviors included passively sitting, standing or lying down, walking around the room, and solitary play. They hypothesized that if the dogs were behaving in a way consistent with empathy, they would respond more to the person who was crying than to the “silent witness,” and if they approached their owner when the stranger was crying, this might suggest the dogs were comfort-seeking (Custance & Mayer, 2012).

The researchers found that significantly more dogs displayed person-oriented behaviors (approach and contact) during the crying condition than during both the humming condition and in-between-session talking. Additionally, the dogs directed significantly more person-oriented behaviors toward the person crying than to the silent witness, regardless of whether the person crying was their owner or the stranger. Furthermore, they analyzed the dogs’ “emotional postures” (calm, submissive, alert, and playful), and found that of the 15 dogs who approached during the crying sessions, 13 of them were judged to have done so in a submission manner.
From their data, Custance and Mayer (2012) claimed: “the majority of dogs in the present study behaved in a manner that was consistent with empathic concern and comfort-offering” (p. 857). They then discussed and rejected several explanations for the dogs’ responding for reasons other than that of empathy, such as curiosity and personal distress. With respect to curiosity, they claimed that since the dogs differentiated between the crying and humming, their specific response to the crying could not have been driven solely by curiosity. Furthermore, they explained that if the crying triggered personal distress, the dogs would have been more likely to approach their owner during all of the crying conditions, as their owner would be their typical source of comfort. However, as their observations revealed, the dogs displayed more person-oriented behaviors toward the person who was crying, regardless of who that person was. In this respect, the dogs’ behaviors were not caused strictly by curiosity or personal distress. So while Custance and Mayer’s (2012) findings begin to shed light on the dog’s sensitivity to human emotions, they concluded that their study does not reveal definitive evidence to support the idea that the dogs’ behavior explicitly indicated empathy. Even still, it is crucial to remember that dogs cannot explain vicarious experiences in such a way that humans can, that is, through language and with certain human-specific behaviors. However, this alone should not dismiss the possibility that dogs may be sensitive to our emotions.

Combined with the previously discussed evidence that dogs interpret and display a use of human-like social skills, it becomes clear that the dog is sensitive to human behavior, and perhaps also to human emotions. Whether the relationship between dogs and humans is that of commensalism, mutualism, parasitism, amensalism, or some combination of the four, the nature of this bond seems to be highly dependent on the cultural and individual context of each human-dog association. With respect to companion dogs in the United States and Europe, specifically,
there appears to be a consensus among researchers that there is a complex relationship between humans and dogs, in that dogs exhibit an immense sensitivity to human behavior which impacts how humans view and interact with dogs. These factors likely contribute to the strength of the bonds that can be formed between the two species, which will be looked at in detail in the following section, specifically in relation to the child-dog bond. However, prior to delving into children’s relationships with dogs exclusively, a background will first be explored on children’s connections with animals in general.

**Animals in Children’s Lives**

While over the last two decades there has been a growing interest in researching and understanding relationships between children and animals, Melson (2005) claims that many major scholars of child development have traditionally overlooked the presence and potential significance of these bonds. Psychologists such as Piaget, Bowlby, and Bronfenbrenner deeply explored cognitive development, attachment theory, and ecological theory, primarily by investigating children’s relationships with parents, peers, siblings, and objects. While their contribution to the field has greatly shaped our present understanding of childhood and child development, according to Melson, they did not delve into analyzing children’s bonds with animals. Until recently, the possibility has been largely ignored that children’s relationships and experiences with nonhuman creatures may be an important element to their development.

In 1984, Edward O. Wilson’s biophilia hypothesis asserted that human beings are genetically predisposed to have an affinity with other organisms, and that children are no exception (Meadan & Jegatheesan, 2010; Melson, 2005). According to Melson’s (2005) understanding of this hypothesis, “Biophilia depicts children as born assuming a connection with
other living things. The emotions and personalities of animals, real and symbolic, are immediate to children in the same way that the emotions and personalities of people are. Because of this, animals enter the drama of a child’s life in direct and powerful ways” (pp. 19-20). Thus, children oftentimes display a natural attraction to and curiosity about animals, forming unique bonds with nonhuman creatures. Recently, scholars have begun investigating the nature of these relationships, which contributes to the growing literature on the emotional, developmental, and physiological significance of child-animal bonds.

Today, pets live in at least 75 percent of all American households with children, and Melson (2005) argues that “the ties that children forge with their pets are often among the most significant bonds of childhood, as deeply affecting as those with parents, siblings, and friends” (p. 16). While some readers may interpret this as a bold and overstated claim, the author goes on to draw parallels between children’s relationships with humans and their relationships with nonhuman animals. She describes that like parents, pets can provide children with emotional support, comfort in times of stress, and feelings of being loved; like siblings, they can be at-home play companions and afterschool company; and like peers, animals can be keepers of secrets and playmates (Melson, 2005). Of course, the nature and characteristics of child-animal bonds are not identical to children’s relationships with other humans, and thus they cannot and should not be compared in the exact same light. Rather, there are aspects of children’s connections with animals that appear to be significant and reminiscent of their bonds with family members and peers.

In this way, pets can be considered extensions of the family. For example, in an interview about having pets, one ten-year-old girl clarified the tiers of her family in the following way: “First, of course, there’s my mother and father. Next comes Igor [her hamster] and Phillip
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[her brother]. And then comes Mozart [the family dog] and Felix [the cat]. Igor is like a sibling, so I put him on the same level as my brother” (Melson, 2005, p. 39). This clearly displays the unique way in which this child views and chooses to state the dynamics of her human and non-human family. While she identifies her parents as coming first, she then considers the bond with her hamster, Igor, to be balanced with her relationship with Phillip, her brother. Interestingly, she does not place the other animals in her home on this same level, which reveals that there is an especially significant connection between herself and Igor – that “Igor is like a sibling.”

Similarly, in a study by Tipper (2011), the researcher found that children not only readily included pets in their definition of their family, but they also considered their animals to be their close friends. In addition to responding to interview questions, the 49 participants (aged 7-12) were also asked to complete a “concentric circles map,” in which they plotted how emotionally close they felt to various individuals in their lives. Although animals were not prompted in this activity, nor were they the focus of the study, 60% of the children included animals on their circles diagrams and 90% of them mentioned animals at some point in the interview (Tipper, 2011). Thus, the reality of how prevalent and important pets are in the lives of children becomes increasingly apparent through investigating the current research. Of course, it is important to note that children’s relationships with animals are not substitutes for their relationships with other humans (Blue, 1986; Gavriele-Gold, 2011). Instead, pets can provide children with varying extents of unique and fulfilling relationships throughout their growth and development.

Melson (2005) describes an intriguing aspect of the child-animal bond, in that as children mature and begin to withhold their private lives from family members, “the tendency to enlist pets as confidants shows no signs of diminishing” (p. 48). Thus, she argues that the strength of children’s relationships with animals does not weaken throughout children’s development or as a
result of maturing. However, it is important to stress that children’s relationships with family members do not necessarily diminish as they grow, which could be inferred by the way in which Melson (2005) discusses this aspect of the child-animal bond. Instead, the dynamics of these relationships often change, as family and friends can take on different roles in children’s lives. Whereas children eventually define themselves as distinct and autonomous from their family members through their own identity development, Melson claims that such psychological separation from one’s pet is “never a prerequisite for maturity” (Melson, 2005, p. 49). In this respect, Melson (2005) argues that pets can remain a close source of comfort and confidence for children no matter their age or maturity, which may not always be the case for other human relationships.

Furthermore, children’s connections with animals can differ from their relationships with humans in other ways, which reveals more unique features and potential benefits of the child-animal bond. For example, whereas human birth and death are oftentimes hidden from children, parents frequently allow animals to “enact the dramas of birth and death in a visible and accessible way” to children (Melson, 2005, p. 17). These experiences not only educate children about the life cycle, but can also strengthen their understanding of the animal and their relationship with the animal. Additionally, since cross-species communication is almost entirely nonverbal, at least in one direction, non-human animals also challenge children to decode body motion, gestures, and sounds in ways that are different from human-human communication. According to Melson (2005), “An animal pushes a child to recognize the distinct subjectivity of a being who moves and communicates in ways very different from those of the child” (p. 17). Thus, by bonding with animals, children are encouraged to explore unfamiliar means of communication, which builds upon their experiences of connecting with others. Lastly, pets can
be social partners who tend to bring on physiological relaxation for children, making new situations less stressful and more approachable. In one particular study, which will be discussed in more detail later, researchers found that children’s stress levels were significantly lower when interacting with a friendly dog than with either a friendly human or a toy dog during a stressful situation (Beetz et al., 2011). The researchers also revealed that the more children stroked the dog, the less pronounced was their stress reaction (Beetz et al., 2011). Therefore, this study displays evidence to support the notion that animals have the potential to trigger beneficial physiological responses in children, in ways that adults or inanimate objects may not.

These different aspects of child-animal relationships are critical to acknowledge and understand when considering the possible advantages of these bonds. For instance, Blue (1986) discusses how the child-animal relationship can foster the following six areas: (1) love, attachment, and comfort; (2) sensorimotor and nonverbal learning; (3) responsibility, nurturance, and sense of competence; (4) learning about life, death, and grief; (5) therapeutic benefits to psychological and physical health; and (6) nurturing humaneness, ecological awareness, and ethical responsibility. Many of these features have already been mentioned in some level of detail, which displays the consistent themes that exist across the present literature on the child-animal bond. As this paper moves on to explore the child-dog bond specifically, these themes will remain a prominent part of the research and discussion surrounding the benefits of relationships between children and dogs and of canine-assisted therapy for children.

**The Child-Dog Bond and Canine-Assisted Therapy**

While Blue (1986) does not claim a single species to be the most significant in child-animal relationships, she undeniably refers to children’s relationships with dogs most frequently
throughout her work. In fact, much of the existing literature regarding the child-animal bond also reflects a similar trend, revealing some kind of exceptionality in the bonds that can be formed between children and dogs, specifically. However, this is not surprising, considering the long and unique history that humans share with dogs. Also contributing to this reality is the sheer number of dogs who live in homes with children across the United States. There are approximately 78.2 million dogs in the United States, and at least 46 percent of households own at least one dog (The Humane Society, 2012). Since 75 percent of American households have both children and pets, it can be inferred that a large percentage of children who live with pets are living with a pet dog (Melson, 2005). Supporting this claim is a 2006 survey which found that 51 percent of American families with children under 18 have at least one dog (Newport, Jones, Saad, & Carroll, 2006). For these reasons, we can begin to understand why the relationship between children and dogs may be so significant and why this area has been so heavily explored by researchers.

Within the last fifty years, research on the child-dog bond has greatly expanded and interest in how these bonds can facilitate children’s development and well-being has also swelled through the growth of animal-assisted therapy practices. Prior to the early 2000’s, however, scholars rarely explored animal-assisted therapy for children, even though American child psychologist Boris Levinson is considered to have founded the movement in the 1960’s (Chandler, 2012; Melson, 2005). Levinson became the first professionally trained clinician to formally introduce and document the ways in which companion animals could support the patient-therapist rapport and the recovery of withdrawn and uncommunicative children. From his experiences and research, Levinson published his first work in 1962 titled, “The Dog as a ‘Co-therapist,’” in which he describes the use of a dog as an agent to help children with psychological
challenges. While animal-assisted therapy took several decades to gain recognition and popularity, today the practice is ever-growing and several species are now considered in the term “animal-assisted therapy,” including horses, dogs, and dolphins. However, the specific form of canine-assisted therapy for children has become the most prominent type of animal-assisted therapy both in practice and in research (Beetz, Uvnäs-Moberg, Julius, & Kotrschal, 2012). Over the last fifteen years, canine-assisted therapy has been shown to be physiologically, emotionally, socially, and academically beneficial for countless children in a variety of settings (Beetz et al., 2012; Beetz et al., 2011; Chandler, 2012; Tsai, Friedmann, & Thomas, 2010).

**Characteristics of Canine-Assisted Therapy**

Canine-assisted therapy is presently being done with children and adults for various reasons in locations such as schools, nursing homes, hospitals, and clinicians’ offices. For instance, in schools, certified therapy dogs are included in reading assistance programs to support children’s reading development in a non-judgmental way, and in hospitals, therapy dogs visit with children to decrease stress by providing them with a diversion from the hospital routine. However, while working with therapy dogs may elicit similar responses to that of bonding with the family dog, canine-assisted therapy for children has several important characteristics that distinguish the two from one another. Certified pediatric therapy dogs and their human handlers are a specially trained, evaluated, and registered team and together, they are selected to volunteer in specific and appropriate programs (K-9's for kids). According to Jalongo, Astorino, and Bomboy (2004), “Animal-assisted activity and therapy is much more than just bringing a family pet along to a school or hospital. In schools, therapy dogs are part of an educational goal, while in hospitals, they are part of the patient’s treatment plan” (p. 11). Thus,
canine-assisted therapy programs serve unique and specific purposes for children by first creating a goal for the individual child and then by incorporating the presence of a certified therapy dog. While this form of “therapy” may be different from our traditional understanding or expectation of the term “therapy,” that is, of diagnoses, treatment, and psychotherapy by a licensed psychologist, pediatric canine-assisted therapy programs work towards eliciting positive effects on children’s well-being and social, emotional, and academic development. Since my study focuses on a canine-assisted reading program in an elementary school, this section will primarily address research on the effects of canine-assisted therapy programs conducted in school settings. However, before discussing the specific effects of these programs, it is first necessary to provide a brief discussion regarding the presence and roles of dogs in schools.

**The Presence and Roles of Dogs in Schools**

For many years, pets such as fish, hamsters, and guinea pigs have been kept in classrooms, but only recently have dogs entered elementary, middle, and high schools. Today, certified therapy dogs are included in classroom lessons and can also be seen assisting children in various ways alongside school counselors, principals, and librarians (Chandler, 2012). According to Walters Esteves and Stokes (2008):

> It would be beneficial to use dogs in schools as assistants to the school counselor, psychologist, or speech and physical therapists to assist in increasing communication, speech, or motor skills. Dogs can also be used as an assistant in the classroom in teaching a specific task such as daily living skills, or as part of a curriculum such as reading, writing, story time, circle time, etc. A dog can act as the subject for creative writing, for reading stories about dogs, or can participate with children in group activities, with the dog being counted as a member of the group. (p.14)
In this respect, Walters Esteves and Stokes (2008) argue that dogs can and should be considered beneficial members of school communities. In her book on animal-assisted therapy in counseling, Chandler (2012) discusses anecdotal support for canine-assisted therapy in schools, and in the discussions to follow it will become clear that research has also shown that therapy dogs can enhance children’s social, emotional, and academic experiences at school.

However, Walters Esteves and Stokes (2008) attend to the fact that it may not be beneficial to have a dog present throughout the entire school day, as this could be exhausting for the dog and potentially disruptive to the children. Additionally, they emphasize that some cultural customs and some children's past experiences may inhibit them from benefiting from the presence of the therapy dog. Therefore, it is crucial for educators to carefully develop school-based canine-assistance programs that outline details such as: where, when, and why the therapy dog will be present, what students will be included or participate in the program, and how the environment will be kept safe for the children, adults, and dog(s) involved.

*Physiological Effects of Human-Dog Interactions and Canine-Assisted Therapy for Children and Adults*

Although the focus of this section is on child-dog interactions and canine-assisted therapy for children, it is important to note that more research has been conducted on the physiological effects of adult-dog interactions than on child-dog interactions. Additionally, to my knowledge, there is no research that investigates the physiological effects of canine-assisted therapy for children in school settings, specifically. Thus, for the purpose of highlighting the range of biological effects of human-dog interactions, a study that explored oxytocin levels in adult dog owners will first be discussed prior to looking at the physiological effects in children. Oxytocin
is a key hormone for bonding between infants and mothers, and also plays an essential role in the neural mechanisms of social bonding and stress buffering, in addition to the reduction of negative emotions in humans (Nagasawa et al., 2009a). Nagasawa et al. (2009a) found that when dogs gazed at their owners their owner’s urinary oxytocin levels increased after the interaction, but when the dogs and owners were unable to make eye contact, there was no significant increase in oxytocin, suggesting that the dog’s gaze stimulated the owner’s oxytocinergic system (Nagasawa et al., 2009a). These results suggest that oxytocin may play an important role in human-dog bonding and attachment, while clearly providing evidence for the positive physiological effects that humans can experience as a result of their interactions with dogs.

While research has yet to explore oxytocin levels in children with respect to their interactions with dogs, several studies in the last ten years have investigated other physiological effects of child-dog relationships. For instance, in one particular study, researchers found that boys aged 7 to 12 years old, who were identified as displaying a highly insecure/disorganized attachment representation on a separation anxiety test for children, had significantly lower salivary cortisol levels when interacting with a friendly dog than with either a “friendly female student” or a toy dog in a stressful situation (Beetz et al., 2011). That is, the children’s stress levels were lowest in the scenario with the real dog. The researchers also revealed that the more the children stroked the dog, the less pronounced was their stress reaction. Thus, they claim that their results suggest that children who have difficulties with profiting from a supportive adult may in fact benefit from the presence of a dog in a stressful situation. Although the generalizability of this study is limited due to their small sample size (31 children), the physiological findings clearly display a significant difference between groups. However, when the participants were asked to provide self-reports of their mood prior to and following the
scenarios, there was no difference found between the three support conditions. The researchers indicated that in all of the conditions, the children reported a good mood before and after the stressful situation, suggesting that they did not perceive the scenario as stressful, perhaps because individuals with insecure/disorganized attachment oftentimes use defense mechanisms to dismiss negative emotions, such as stress. While these emotion-minimizing strategies would affect self-reported mood, the authors reported that they would not affect the children’s physiological reactivity, which is why there were clear differences in their stress reactions across conditions. Therefore, Beetz et al. (2011) concluded that their data provides evidence in support of employing dogs to reduce stress in children. Still, follow-up research is necessary to further investigate both the generalizability of and the consistency between quantitative data and participant’s self-reports of perceived effects.

In another study, Tsai, Friedmann, and Thomas (2010) investigated the effects of canine-assisted therapy on cardiovascular responses, state anxiety, and medical fear in fifteen hospitalized children aged 7 to 17. While the children's self-reported anxiety and medical fear did not differ following the visit from the therapy dog compared with the control intervention with a research assistant, the researchers did find differences regarding the participants’ cardiovascular responses. Tsai, Friedmann, and Thomas (2010) reported that the children’s systolic blood pressure decreased from before, to during, to after the 6 to 10 minute social visit with the therapy dog, compared to the 6 to 10 minute control visit with a research assistant, where their systolic blood pressure only decreased from before to during the visit, but increased from during to after. These findings suggest that visits from a therapy dog may produce a beneficial cardiovascular effect for children in hospital settings, even after the visit has ended, and “therefore may be useful in helping them cope better in a hospital setting” (Tsai, Friedmann, and
Thomas, 2010, p. 245). However, as with the previously discussed study, this topic must be researched further to investigate why there are significant physiological findings that support canine-assisted therapy, while self-reports of participants do not reflect these same results. Perhaps by also conducting interviews with children in addition to drawing from self-reported questionnaires, the complexities of children’s experiences in the various conditions would be exposed, thus providing a more in-depth understanding of how they perceive each situation, which could in turn help researchers grapple with this inconsistency within their findings.

**Social and Emotional Effects of Child-Dog Interactions and Canine-Assisted Therapy for Children**

With respect to the social and emotional effects of the child-dog bond and canine-assisted therapy for children, many of the areas that Blue (1986) claims child-animal relationships can foster fall into this category, including: love, attachment, and comfort; responsibility, nurturance, and sense of competence; learning about life, death, and grief; and nurturing humaneness, ecological awareness, and ethical responsibility. Thus, there are countless ways in which children’s interactions with dogs and canine-assisted therapy can positively affect children’s social and emotional well-being and development. For the purpose of the current section, two studies will be discussed that have revealed how the presence of a dog in elementary and middle school classrooms can improve children’s social competence and empathy (Kotrschal & Ortbauer, 2003; Sprinkle, 2008).

In a 2008 study by Sprinkle, the researcher explored the impact of a school-based violence prevention and character education program titled “Healing Species,” where dogs are brought into classrooms to teach antiviolenCe and to encourage prosocial messages to elementary
and middle school-aged children. In each classroom, the program consists of eleven 45-minute weekly lessons, which include topics such as: grieving, empathy, self-responsibility, sharing, cooperating, and service to others. Sprinkle investigated the program’s effect on children’s aggression and empathy at four different schools, where a total of 296 children completed questionnaires prior to and following the program. The questionnaires included the Index of Empathy for Children and Adolescents and the Normative Beliefs About Aggression Scale, where the children rated their agreement with numerous statements about aggression and empathy. Additionally, Sprinkle (2008) collected disciplinary data and teacher observational data both before and after the canine-assisted lessons. Through these data collection methods, she found that the program significantly improved students’ beliefs about aggression, levels of empathy, and displays of violent and aggressive behaviors. Sprinkle (2008) concluded that this program positively affected the children in the study, and thus other violence prevention programs for young people should begin to consider the incorporation of animals and an emphasis on empathy, since many other existing programs have produced insignificant results.

Additionally, in a study by Kotrschal and Ortbauer (2003), the researchers examined whether “suitable and well-trained” dogs have a positive influence on the social behavior of children in a classroom setting (149). To do this, the researchers video recorded a classroom of twenty-four elementary-aged children for one hour, three times a week for one month prior to the dog’s arrival and for the same duration during the dog’s inclusion in the classroom. They then attended to and coded the students’ behavior and interactions with the dog. The researchers concluded that the presence of the dog had significant positive effects on the socialization of the students. Kotrschal and Ortbauer (2003) claimed that:
Although individuals differed substantially in their interest in the dog and in their behavioral responses, the dog’s presence resulted in social integration of the group, mainly by decreasing behavioral extremes. The dog also influenced more intense communication between children and between child and teacher. When the dog was present, overt activity and withdrawal, as well as aggressive integrations, decreased. (pp. 154-155)

Here, not only do Kotrschal and Ortbauer (2003) describe the positive impacts that the dog’s presence had on the children’s behaviors in the classroom, but they also make note of the children’s individual variation in this experience. For instance, some children showed more interest in the dog than others and some children displayed especially dramatic positive behavior changes when in the presence of the dog. This is important to acknowledge, since each child’s experience in a situation such as this would greatly vary, and thus the dog’s effect on each child would also differ. However, even with the differences that Kotrschal and Ortbauer (2003) reveal, their data display clear and significant results supporting the beneficial effects that a canine can have on children’s behavior in a classroom environment.

*Academic Effects of Child-Dog Interactions and Canine-Assisted Therapy for Children*

Regarding the potential academic benefits of canine-assisted therapy and child-dog interactions, researchers have found that reading to dogs has helped children improve their fluency and confidence in reading (Smith & Meehan, 2010). By using a pre-test/post-test model, Smith and Meehan (2010) found that after a ten-week program where eleven children aged six to eleven years read aloud in the presence of a dog, their overall reading fluency (words per minute) increased by 30 percent. Unfortunately, since they did not use a control group to compare their data to a group of students where a dog was not present, it is difficult to determine whether the
children’s improvements were solely due to the presence of the dog or also due to other factors, such as the additional oral reading practice from the program.

To provide more insight into this uncertainty, Smith and Meehan (2010) referred to another study that they conducted in 2008 with the same canine-assisted reading program, which did use both a control and experimental group in a pre-test/post-test model. In this study, the researchers worked with three third-grade classes (the sample size was not specified in their overview) and found that in the canine-assisted reading group, there was a 12 percent improvement in reading fluency following the program, whereas in the control group, there was no significant difference in reading fluency. Together, the results of these studies suggest that canine-assisted reading is beneficial for children in terms of their quantitatively recorded fluency. Additionally, in their first study, Smith and Meehan (2010) interviewed the participants before and after the reading program and reported a selection of statements regarding the participants’ before and after perceptions of reading aloud to the dogs. Overall, the selected quotes are very positive, displaying the children’s excitement and comfort in reading to the dogs, along with their sense of a newly found confidence in reading. Because this particular study is especially relevant to my own research, I will provide a more in-depth analysis and critique of the study in a later section. Nonetheless, this research displays one way in which the presence of therapy dogs can be academically beneficial for children in school settings.

Including Children’s Voices in Research

Through discussing various effects of the child-dog bond and canine-assisted therapy and programs, it becomes clear that over the last fifteen years, the literature on these impacts has grown tremendously. During this time, researchers have explored canine-assisted therapy
programs for children of all ages with various needs in a range of settings, from hospitals and schools to individual therapy sessions. As the previous section indicated, many studies have revealed the beneficial nature of canine-assisted therapy, particularly in relation to children’s physiological, social, emotional, and academic development and well-being. To research these effects, most of the studies have relied on quantitative measures that compare individuals or groups receiving canine-assisted therapy to control groups that were not experiencing the therapy, in order to look for outcomes such as academic and social skill improvements or reductions in cortisol levels. When qualitative measures have been used, such as with self-reported surveys or with self-reported behavior assessments or mood scales, they are typically secondary to the quantitative findings, and are rarely discussed in great depth by the researchers.

By using quantitative methods, researchers have greatly influenced the growth of the field, since there now exists clear statistical evidence to show the benefits of canine-assisted therapy. However, this is only one piece of the necessary research that must be investigated to more fully understand the effects of these programs. Another aspect, which uses qualitative methods to explore children’s actual voices and personal experiences, has not been studied nearly as thoroughly in the field. Many childhood studies researchers, such as Winkler (2012), James (2007), and Woodhead (2008), have written about the general concept of children’s involvement in research, and through discussing their perspectives on this topic and by analyzing several past studies, the importance of incorporating children’s voices into research will become increasingly clear. To close this final section of my literature review, the implications of understanding the importance of involving children’s voices in research will be applied to the study that I have chosen to conduct.
The Importance of Quantitative and Qualitative Methods in Research

While quantitative research is critically important, solely conducting studies that rely on quantitative measures can limit our understanding of a particular subject or question, which is the case regarding our understanding of canine-assisted therapy. According to Winkler, “because they usually have a predetermined set of questions and responses, studies relying on quantitative methods alone do not fully capture participants’ voices nor the complexities and nuances of their experiences” (pp. 13-14). Here, Winkler describes that quantitative methods can only reveal so much about the actual participants of a study, and that this method cannot delve deeply into individuals’ personal stories or perspectives. As a result, the information we gain from quantitative research alone can be somewhat limited, as the questions of why and how typically remain largely unanswered.

To help close the gap that can be created when only quantitative methods are used in research, studies that involve qualitative methods, such as interviews, can complement the literature on a given subject. Researchers can thus better understand the intricacies of human experiences by incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods in a single study. Winkler (2012) explains that “Through this [qualitative] method, the interviewees can identify what they see as key areas of discussion and address issues not covered by a pre-established set of questions and responses” (p. 14). In this respect, qualitative research can reach beyond the questions of what, where, and when by giving voice to participants’ unique, valuable, and self-directed perspectives, which is critical when attempting to gain a more holistic understanding of a particular subject, idea, or practice.
The Importance of Including Children’s Voices in Childhood Studies Research

To support this concept of “giving voice to children’s voices,” James (2007) claims that childhood research must not only address the issues of representation and authenticity when including children’s voices in research, but researchers must also attend to the diversity of children’s experiences and their participation in research (p. 261). She asserts that if these elements are not addressed, childhood research “will fail to provide an area within which children are seen as social actors who can provide a unique perspective on the social world about matters that concern them as children” (James, 2007, p. 261). In this respect, by presenting children with the opportunity to participate and to express their various experiences in studies that are about them, researchers would be exposed to information that is unattainable by interpreting test scores or behavior rating scales, or by gathering adult perspectives alone. In research where young people’s perspectives are investigated, they are typically viewed as meaning-makers, as individuals who are actively engaging with the world around them and have valuable contributions to share.

When the importance of including children’s voices in childhood studies research is understood and embraced, researchers can uncover information that would be impossible to discover without talking with children directly. Regarding canine-assisted therapy programs, to only gather children’s behavior rating scores or students’ reading scores in the presence or absence of a therapy dog, would be to ignore the participants’ narrative experiences of working with the dog, which could potentially provide significant implications for the growth of the field. While some quantitative methodologies can measure children’s individual experiences (such as self-reported surveys), the depth and quality of this data greatly differs from that obtained through qualitative methodologies. When these personal experiences and perspectives are not
extensively investigated and included in much of the research on canine-assisted therapy, it becomes difficult to conclude whether or not the programs are entirely successful and beneficial, specifically from the participants’ point of view. While the generalizability of quantitative studies is useful to the development of the field, canine-assisted therapy for children is a unique experience for each individual, and the research on this subject should reflect this. Thus, conducting research that attends to these differences in experience is crucial.

**Methods for Including Children’s Voices in Research**

James (2007) argues for several different ways of incorporating children into the research process, including: conducting research that is done in cooperation with children instead of being carried out on children, doing research in a child-centered way, and encouraging children to be their own researchers. While involving children throughout the entire research process is not always feasible nor is it always the goal for all childhood studies research, I believe it is important for childhood studies research to attempt to involve children to the greatest extent possible or appropriate. However, one method for carrying out research involving children is not inherently more valuable than another.

According to Woodhead (2008), “Research with children is designed for a variety of purposes, only some of which are directly about ‘listening to children’s voices’. Many more are about observing children, carrying out surveys or conducting experiments and evaluations” (p. 23). Thus, each study has its own rationale and chosen methodologies that determine how the data will be analyzed and what conclusions will be drawn, all of which are important to the development of any given area. Woodhead (2008) goes on to state that:
It could be argued that the field of Childhood Studies should be reserved for research that engages directly with children’s experiences and perspectives…But this would exclude much research that is more broadly about improving children’s well-being, which may in a greater or lesser degree involve consulting with them directly. (pp. 23-24)

Here, I understand Woodhead to argue that the literature on a particular subject should be balanced. That is, both statistical evidence and narrative accounts of individual experiences are significant to the growth of any particular field. By not incorporating any extent of the methods described by James (2007), or by not incorporating children’s voices into research that directly relates to them, there is no way to be sure that the findings accurately represent or reflect the experiences, concerns, or desires of the children involved.

For example, in a study by Fourie, Crowley, and Oliviera (2011) where the therapeutic relationship in pediatric speech and language therapy was explored from the perspectives of six children, the researchers consistently emphasized the importance of including children’s voices in their study. The researchers also described how their interviewing methodology and analysis would reflect this purpose. For instance, by developing a basic framework for semi-structured interviews that used open-ended questions to avoid yes/no answers, Fourie et al. (2011) encouraged the children to make evaluative comments about their experiences. From here, they used a bracketing process to analyze their data, which they described as “a process in which the researcher actively refrains from making assumptions about the objectivity of a participant’s experience” (Fourie et al., 2011, p. 315). From this philosophy, the three researchers coded the responses of the children and grouped similar codes into several prominent themes in an effort to analyze the data without manipulating the children’s voices. They identified and discussed various themes and provided excerpts from the interviews in order to contextualize and support their claims regarding the themes that they drew from their data analysis. By developing these
themes they were able to provide a structure for describing the children’s experiences with speech-language therapy, which then allowed for them to analyze and better understand how a positive therapeutic bond can be achieved from the perspective of children receiving the therapy.

The Importance of Including Adults’ Perspectives in Childhood Studies Research

While it is clear that including and appropriately representing children’s voices in childhood studies research is significant, we must also recognize the importance of including adults’ perspectives in this research. According to Winkler (2012), “Considering children’s voices on a par with those of adults, however, does not mean we do so to the exclusion of adult perspectives; in fact, adult voices are still an important part of the puzzle” (15). Parents and professionals may have important and alternative perspectives to offer that would positively contribute to our understanding of a given topic. So, while gaining children’s perspectives on matters that concern them is absolutely critical, it is also essential to consider the perspectives of adults who are involved in the lives of the child participants or in the subject area being investigated. This concern for both children’s and adults’ voices can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the material, more so than attending solely to either group. Just as quantitative research alone may limit our understanding of childhood studies research, considering only children’s or adults’ perspectives can also be restrictive. It is when quantitative studies are supported with qualitative studies, or vice versa, and when children’s voices are discussed in association with adults’ voices, that research in a particular area becomes stronger.
Research on Children’s Perspectives of Various Forms of Therapy

Although my study will investigate children’s experiences with a canine-assisted reading program, it is important to briefly discuss the significance of research that has examined children’s perspectives on therapy in general, particularly because there is currently very little research that includes children’s perspectives specifically on canine-assisted therapy. In addition to the research by Fourie, Crowley, and Oliviera (2011), which was discussed in a previous section, other studies have also explored children’s perspectives on various forms of therapy, such as their experiences with play therapy (Carroll, 2002), individual therapy for children with severe emotional and behavioral challenges (DeVet, Kim, Charlot-Swilley, & Ireys, 2003) and family therapy (Strickland-Clark, Campbell, & Dallos, 2000).

In the research by Carroll (2002) and Strickland-Clark et al. (2000), the authors provide the reader with insightful excerpts from their interviews with children, and through this they not only offer themes that emerged from talking with the children, but they also attend to the importance of recognizing each child’s individuality and unique experiences and perspectives with therapy. Practicing child therapist Jo Carroll (2002) interviewed fourteen children aged 9 to 14 years, who she had not previously met, about their experiences with play therapy once their therapy had ended. The interviews were semi-structured, and through her data analysis, she reported the following as being of particular significance: the importance of the therapeutic relationship and children’s devotion to their play therapists; the termination of this relationship, such that children who had felt some control over the termination appeared to have less ambivalent feelings in retrospect than those who played no part in decision-making; the children’s attitude towards talking, as some children saw it as an uncomfortable but necessary
process and saw playing as a pleasant distraction so that talking would be less painful; and the importance of having fun in their therapy sessions (Carroll, 2002, p. 185).

Carroll (2002) also described the implications of her research and the profound impact that her findings have had on the way in which she perceives her role as a child therapist:

I cannot claim generalizability, and do not suggest that other therapists change their practice on the evidence outlined here. Nevertheless, hearing children talk about the vital, and vibrant, relationships they develop with their therapists has been humbling; trying to understand their views of therapeutic processes and thinking about my own responses in the playroom personally challenging. (p. 186)

Here, Carroll (2002) alludes to the self-reflection that this study has sparked, and closes with the following remark: “Children have much to teach us, if we can find ways to listen” (p. 186). I believe that this is a powerful statement that displays the importance of listening to children’s voices. Furthermore, these words represent a prominent force that drives much of the research on children’s perspectives on therapy and, in general, on the research that strives to include and explore children’s voices and individual perspectives.

The work by Strickland-Clark et al. (2000) also reflects the importance of including children’s perspectives in research. The researchers expressed how the lack of literature on children’s perceptions of the process of therapy drove their research, and by interviewing children about their experiences with family therapy, they were able to gain insight on the following: children’s perceived importance of being heard and listened to, the reality and difficulty of not feeling heard, the challenge of bringing back memories and expressing thoughts and feelings, their concerns about the reactions of their family members and the consequences of speaking out, and that they understood therapy as a challenge where they had to face their struggles. In addition to acknowledging that children’s voices have much to teach us, Strickland-
Clark et al. (2000) also claimed that researching children’s perspectives on therapy can serve to empower children, since through the research process they are viewed as individuals with experience and knowledge to offer. Through this, the researchers expressed that conducting more research that involves children’s perspectives on therapy will aid in the development of a more child-centered approach to therapy.

While there does not exist a plethora of research that explores children’s perspectives on various forms of therapy, there are a fair number of studies that have very carefully and thoroughly given voice to children’s experiences in these settings. By listening to their voices and by sharing their perspectives, these researchers have not only given children the opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions, but they have also gained insight into the inner workings of children’s experiences. This can greatly impact the way other researchers, therapists, and the adult population in general understand what is important to children, and from here, we may be able to better provide therapy services to them. In a similar way, gaining insight on children’s perspectives on canine-assisted therapy programs would also be incredibly beneficial, not only to the development of the field, but also to the development of the programs offered to children.

**Children’s Voices in Research on Canine-Assisted Therapy**

As previously mentioned, very few qualitative studies have been conducted in the field of canine-assisted therapy for children. However, one study in this area that did include children’s voices has been of particular interest to the development of my study. Smith and Meehan’s (2010) research, which was mentioned in a previous section, investigated changes in reading fluency skills and attitudes toward therapy dogs over the course of a 10-week implementation of the “All Ears Reading®” program. In addition to gathering fluency scores, the researchers
Canines and Kids

reported, “interviews of participants and surveys of their parents/guardians were utilized to give a more in-depth understanding of the impact that the “All Ears Reading®” program had on the youth” (Smith & Meehan, 2010, p. 1). Thus, the researchers embraced quantitative and qualitative methods for their study and found that the dogs helped to facilitate positive changes both in the children’s oral fluency skills and in their perceptions of reading aloud.

However, Smith and Meehan’s (2010) analysis of the children’s and adults’ responses to the interview questions was too brief, as they only listed quotations from the interviews without providing any in-depth discussion about the possible implications of the children’s and adults’ perspectives. For instance, the authors selected the following statements regarding the children’s perspectives on reading aloud prior to the canine-assisted sessions: “I don’t like it;” “It makes me self-conscious;” “I make mistakes;” “I’m not comfortable;” “I lack confidence;” “I feel slow and clumsy” (p. 3). Clearly, each of these quotations displays a negative association with reading, but I am left wondering whether every child participant shared this negative view of reading, or if the researchers only selected excerpts that supported a prominent theme, omitting the children’s voices that were in contrast. Even if just one child held a very positive outlook on reading, this would be an important factor and difference to note, as in the very least it reveals the reality of individual variation within a study. Furthermore, given the quotations that Smith and Meehan (2010) provided, they still could have grouped the responses into themes beyond the overarching theme of negative association. Based on my analysis of the children’s statements they quoted, I would suggest themes such as: Children’s discomfort with reading, Negative effects that reading may have on children’s self-confidence, and Children’s perceptions of their reading skills. While these themes may overlap one another, they provide a structure that allows for the children’s responses to be appropriately represented and discussed.
Additionally, after the completion of the canine-assisted reading programs, Smith and Meehan (2010) reported the following statements about children’s perceptions of reading aloud to dogs: “Dogs don’t critique you; they just listen;” “I feel relaxed when I am reading to a dog because I am having fun;” “I felt like I was reading out loud faster and better;” “The dogs don’t care if you read really, really bad (sic) so you just keep going;” “The beginning was worse than the end, ’cause in the beginning I struggled to read because I didn’t really like it, but at the end I got better at reading and then I started to like it more;” “The dogs help by not pushing me to do my work and by calming me” (p. 3). Again, after reading this I was left wondering what themes or ideas were of particular value to the authors, and why the selected responses were chosen for the published paper. From analyzing the quoted responses that Smith and Meehan (2010) offered, I would suggest themes such as: Children’s positive associations with dogs, Children’s perceptions of dogs’ nonjudgmental nature, Children’s improved perceived reading abilities, and Children’s development of positive associations with reading. By analyzing the children’s responses in this way, and by not only including quotations that strongly reflect the prominent and overarching theme, the researchers could have presented a more thorough representation of the children’s perspectives on the canine-assisted reading program. Smith and Meehan (2010) also provided excerpts from their interviews with the parents/guardians, but in a similar way to their analysis of the children’s perspectives, their analysis of the adults’ perspectives was also limited. In my research that follows, I will also be exploring children’s and adults’ experiences with a canine-assisted reading program, but I hope to represent and analyze their voices in much greater depth to further our understanding on this subject.
Implications for My Research

Overall, while there is an impressive amount of research that reveals the various emotional, academic, and physiological benefits of canine-assisted therapy, much of the existing literature does not include any thorough discussion of children’s perspectives on the subject. While statistical evidence is critical for canine-assisted therapy to be considered beneficial, I believe that qualitative accounts of students’ individual experiences are also imperative for the development of the field. In my project, I will explore how a canine-assisted reading program is experienced by young people who are receiving the services in their elementary school and by adults who are involved in this process. I believe that in order to appropriately discuss this, it is imperative to gain insight from the children who are directly affected by the program and by the bonds that can form between them and the dogs. Through this research, I hope to reveal and investigate children’s personal stories, opinions, excitements, and uncertainties regarding a canine-assisted reading program in an elementary school setting, as well as the viewpoints of adults who are involved in the program as either teachers or dog handlers.

My methodologies will reflect my interest in the importance of including children’s voices in research, along with adults’ voices, and will draw from the knowledge I have gained from reading literature pertaining to canine-assisted therapy and childhood studies. Of the many works of scholarship and research that have been discussed in this literature review, Winkler (2012), Smith and Meehan (2010), and Fourie, Crowley, and Oliviera (2011) have been particularly influential to the planning of my research. Like Fourie, Crowley, and Oliviera (2011), I have designed my interviews in a semi-structured way for several reasons: to keep the interviews on task, to provide the child and adult participants with guiding questions, and to allow freedom for the discussion to lead to areas where I may not have originally expected.
Rather than merely asking a series of questions to obtain a response, the interviews have been designed to initiate discussions between the participants and myself. I believe this generates a less pressured and more genuine representation of their perspectives on the canine-assisted reading program.

Throughout my study, I have strived to represent the children’s and adults’ voices carefully, clearly, and truthfully. Along these lines, Warming (2011) described the significance of “assessing and representing children’s perspectives in a sound and ethical way which takes into account the fact that child positions are diverse” (p. 51). Thus, while I will discuss themes and similarities that arise across interviews, I will emphasize the reality of individual variation and the importance of considering and appreciating each child’s unique experience with the canine-assisted reading program. In other words, I will make clear that every participant’s perspective is a valid contribution to my research. Through this, I will work towards beginning to fill a gap in the existing literature, which has yet to thoroughly investigate children’s experiences with canine-assisted therapy. By interviewing child and adult participants, I will explore their personal stories and perspectives regarding a canine-assisted reading program, and will discuss whether pediatric therapy dogs can be considered beneficial members of an elementary school community.
Chapter 2: Methodology

Research Context

This research was conducted in close collaboration with Melissa Kielbasa, the founder and lead trainer of Sandy Meadow Farm Dog Obedience School in Westfield, Massachusetts. Melissa, who gave permission for her real name to be used, is also the founder and director of the “K-9’s for Kids Pediatric Therapy Unit,” a volunteer-based dog therapy organization that serves children in Western Massachusetts and Connecticut in settings such as medical pediatric facilities, libraries, and school systems. This therapy dog unit consists of over 25 dog-handler teams who have together successfully passed three different evaluation prerequisites: (1) The AKC Canine Good Citizenship Test; (2) A Pediatric Therapy Dog Training Course; and (3) The “K-9's for Kids” Performance and Evaluation Test. Once they have completed these requirements, they become certified pediatric therapy dogs, who, with their handler, are invited to become members of the “K-9’s for Kids Pediatric Therapy Unit.” The dogs in this program represent numerous breeds and mixed breeds, including: Australian Shepherds, Golden Retrievers, Rottweilers, Collies, German Shepherds, Pugs, Labrador Retrievers, and more. Additionally, according to “K-9’s for Kids:”

Dogs must be over 18 months of age, must exhibit excellent social skills around other dogs, must be able to respond reliably to obedience cues in highly distracting environments, and must absolutely adore being around kids. Dogs must be current on all required vaccinations, supply negative heartworm and fecal test results, and be physically capable of supplying therapy services. Handlers must be comfortable having any necessary background checks performed that are required by our various visitation locations, including a CORI (criminal offender record information). (K-9's for kids)
By ensuring that the handlers and dogs meet these requirements, the “K-9’s for Kids” teams are able to safely serve children in the community.

In one of my interviews with Melissa, which will be explored in greater depth in the Analysis chapter, she explained that some of the dogs in the program enter into “K-9’s for Kids” with a natural interest and drive to do this work, and also described how some dogs can truly “blossom” in the program:

I think a lot of it is just their temperament and there is some sort of innate skill to feeling that [connection with children]. There seems to be dogs that are more connected compassionately with people and are really comfortable with that connection. There's other dogs that are very connected with their owners in that way but aren't comfortable with having that same connection with somebody that's not within their family. We look for the dogs that are more comfortable with that outside of their family as well. I've definitely seen dogs that we have brought into the program that were fine, everything was good, their skills were good, their attention, their response to the children went really, really well, and then after they're in the program for a while you just see that blossom, where they kind of get it. They get the job once they're there, and you can just see them figuring this out a whole lot more the more they practice it. The more they're submerged in it, the more it becomes surface for them, as to what they're there for and that they can get that connection even with others that they maybe hadn't experienced before or opened up to before.

They're more willing to do that.

Here, Melissa reveals how dogs may grow in the program, and how they may learn to connect with children in a way that they may not have previously experienced. Later in the interview she described that this is not something that can be taught in the program, but rather, when a dog has the ability to connect with children, this interest can be built upon.

Within the “K-9’s for Kids” unit is the “Read to Rover” program, which offers canine-assisted reading services to children in local elementary schools and libraries. In an interview
with Melissa, she described how in the early 2000’s she was approached by members of a local elementary school who expressed an interest in bringing dogs into the school to provide canine-assisted reading services to students. At this point, “K-9’s for Kids” was already established and dog-handler pairs were currently visiting patients at the Shriners Hospital for Children. However, the program had not yet entered into school systems. Upon agreeing to this proposal, Melissa and the school developed the “Read to Rover” program. Presently, there are over thirty children and eleven dog-handler teams involved in the “Read to Rover” school program and each child participant is visited in their school, typically every other week for fifteen minutes by the same dog-handler team over the course of the school year. During this time, they are given the opportunity to read something of their choice to their canine reading partner.

For this study, all of the child participants attended the same elementary school in Western Massachusetts. This was the first school to invite “Read to Rover” into their community in the early 2000’s, and each year, the school typically offers its services to between seven and ten students. Although I did not ask the child participants of my study to share their racial/ethnic identities, according to school records, the following racial/ethnic demographics were provided for the school’s population: White (78%); Hispanic (17%); Asian (2%); Asian/Pacific Islander (2%); Black (2%); Multiracial (0.3%); and Native American or Native Alaskan (0.3%). In order to ensure the child participants’ privacy, the name of their school will be kept confidential.

Interviews were conducted with children who, at the time of the research, were already receiving services from “Read to Rover.” Additionally, interviews were conducted with adults who were also already involved with the program, either as a handler or teacher. Consequently, the goal of this research was not to introduce a canine-assisted reading program to a new group
of children, but rather, to learn about the experiences of children and adults who were presently or (in the case of one adult) previously involved in this program.

**Ethics**

Prior to conducting interviews, I first received permission to begin this study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Hampshire College. The importance of the IRB is to ensure that research complies with ethical standards and that participants are aware of their rights and are not put at risk or in harm during the research process. In order to be reviewed by the IRB committee, I completed an in-depth application that carefully presented the details of my research, which included a description of the following aspects of my study: the purpose of the research; the type of participants and how they would be recruited; the procedure, which encompassed examples of the interview questions; the possible benefits of the research and how any potential risks would be avoided and dealt with if necessary; how informed consent/assent would be obtained; and how privacy would be ensured for all participants. Additionally, I was required to present site authorization to the IRB committee, which made clear that I had gained permission to conduct my research in the school that offered the “Read to Rover” program. By completing the IRB application and receiving approval, I was encouraged to contemplate how my study would comply with the ethical standards of conducting research on human subjects, which I learned is a critical component of the research process.
Participants

Child Participants

In order to recruit child participants for this study, packets were sent home from school to the parent(s)/guardian(s) of children who were presently involved in “Read to Rover,” inviting them to participate in the research. The packets included a description of the study and a description of participants’ rights and ensured confidentiality, along with parental/guardian informed consent information and forms and child informed assent information and forms. On the consent forms, parents/guardians were asked to choose the level of participation they felt most comfortable with for their child. Similarly, on the child assent forms, the children were also asked to choose the level of participation they felt most comfortable with. The levels of participation included: conducting an observation of one of the child’s “Read to Rover” sessions; giving a questionnaire to the child regarding their experiences with the program; or conducting an interview with the child regarding their experiences with the program. (These options were offered because some parents/guardians/children may be more comfortable with a written questionnaire than with an interview, or vice versa).

A total of seven children were involved in the “Read to Rover” program at this school during the time that research was conducted, all of whom were invited to participate in this study. Of the seven children who were invited, four children returned consent/assent forms. On all of the returned forms, every child assented to being interviewed and observed and every parent/guardian consented to their child being interviewed and observed (two children marked that they did not want to answer a questionnaire). Thus, for this study, all four children were observed during one of their “Read to Rover” visits and all four were individually interviewed.
following this visit. At the time that research was conducted, I had no prior relationship to any of the child participants.

The four child participants of this study were elementary-aged students, in grades three and five, and had been involved with “Read to Rover” from the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year. The children were referred to “Read to Rover” by their teachers, and following this referral, each child’s parent(s)/guardian(s) then gave them permission to take part in the canine-assisted reading visits. All but one of the children in this study had been meeting with their canine reading partner once a week for fifteen minutes every other week, with the one exception being a student who had been meeting with a “Read to Rover” dog three times a week for fifteen minutes every other week.

Additionally, because “Read to Rover” takes place on three days every other week, three different certified pediatric therapy dogs are involved in the program at this particular school. However, the same dog-handler pair makes visitations on the same day throughout the duration of the program, and thus the children are matched with a specific and consistent dog-handler pair. (The student who receives three visits every other week works with all three dogs.) During the time that my study was conducted, and for several weeks prior, Melissa Kielbasa and her certified pediatric therapy dog were covering for one of the other handler-dog teams. Thus, three of the children had limited experience with this dog-handler team, although I do not believe this adversely affected an aspect of my study.

**Adult Participants**

In order to recruit adult participants, Melissa Kielbasa provided me with recommendations and contact information for two handlers and two teachers who had experience
with “Read to Rover.” From here, I reached out to the four individuals who were recommended and invited them to participate in the study either through email or in person. All five adults, including Melissa, expressed an interest in being participants in the research, and prior to conducting interviews I obtained written informed consent from each person. Much like the consent/assent forms for the child participants, the consent forms for the adult participants also provided a description of the study and a description of participants’ rights and ensured confidentiality. However, the consent forms for the adults were solely for the purpose of conducting interviews. Aside from Melissa and one other handler with whom I attended dog-training classes, I had no prior relationship to any of the other adult participants at the time that research was conducted.

The five adult participants of this study varied in their role, involvement, and extent of experience with the “Read to Rover” program. Three of the adult participants, one of whom was Melissa, were handlers of dogs who were pediatric therapy certified and together were members of the “K-9’s for Kids” unit. The other two adult participants were elementary school teachers who had experience with assisting in the development and organization of “Read to Rover” in their school, in addition to having experience with referring students to the program. With respect to the three handlers, they ranged from having one year to over ten years of experience with “Read to Rover,” and the two teachers ranged from having eight years to over ten years of experience in the program.

Data Collection

Since the goal of this study was to explore how canine-assisted reading services are experienced by young people and perceived by adults who are involved in the process,
qualitative methods were chosen in order to gain an understanding of the participants’ unique perspectives. Specifically, I chose semi-structured interviewing as the primary method for collecting data, in order to capture the subjective experiences of each participant. By using the questions I crafted as a guide rather than a definitive structure to each interview, the “core” questions served as a starting point, from which a conversation about the topic could arise. For the purpose of accuracy and data analysis, all of the interviews were audio recorded, which each participant was informed of and agreed to by signing the informed consent/assent statement.

**Child Data Collection**

With respect to the child participants, questions for the interviews were carefully developed in a child-friendly way that would encourage children to think and talk about their experiences with their canine reading partner. The following core questions were asked to each child participant. Depending on the children’s responses, additional follow-up questions were asked:

1. What do you like or not like about your visits from (name of dog)?
2. How do you feel when you read to (name of dog)?
3. Have your reading habits changed since you began reading with (name of dog)?
   If so, how?
4. How do you feel about having a dog come to your school?
5. Do you have any pets? What kind?
   If so, do you read to your pets at home?
These questions attempted to delve both into what the children think and feel about the time they spend with their canine reading partner, in addition to what they think and feel about the broader idea of having a dog visit their school.

The wording of the child-directed questions was purposefully chosen for several reasons. Most significantly, I wanted to minimize my influence on the children’s responses and maximize their narrative responses. To do this, I crafted open-ended questions as opposed to yes/no questions, in order to encourage the children to share their stories and have their individual voices heard. Additionally, I avoided asking leading questions that could have assumed the child’s experience in the program. For instance, I did not ask questions that would suggest the dog inherently helps the child. Instead, as in the first question, I provided the child with a more balanced and unbiased question that welcomed a range of possible responses.

For the child participants, interviews took place immediately following one of their “Read to Rover” visits, which I also observed. The setting of the observations and interviews was consistent across participants, and took place in a hallway in the school, which is where the “Read to Rover” sessions typically take place. Unfortunately, due to unexpected time constraints, the “Read to Rover” sessions had to be shortened on the day that I conducted my observations and interviews. Thus, whereas the reading times are typically fifteen minutes long per student, the reading times were shortened to about five minutes per student. Additionally, this time constraint placed pressure on the length of the interviews. Each child was individually interviewed once, and the interviews lasted between three and five minutes.
Adult Data Collection

The process of creating interview questions for the adults was similar to how the children’s questions were developed. For instance, in an attempt to elicit narrative responses regarding their perspectives on the “Read to Rover” program, yes/no and leading questions were avoided and instead, open-ended questions were asked. The following core questions were asked to all of the adult participants. As with the children, additional follow-up questions may have been asked during the adult interviews depending on their responses to the questions. (The question marked “T” indicates that only the teachers were asked this question.)

1. How long have you been involved with the “Read to Rover” program and how did you become involved with this program?

(T) 2. Have you noticed any changes in the children who participate in this program, such as changes in reading skills or habits, or changes in behavior, etc.?

3. What do you think about having a canine-assisted reading program in schools? What do you think about having dogs in schools?

4. What do you think are the potential benefits of this program? What do you think are the potential concerns?

5. From your experiences, can you describe an instance of particular interest when watching the interactions between the children and dogs?

Each adult was interviewed only once, with the exception of Melissa Kielbasa, who was interviewed twice, due to her foundational role in “K-9’s for Kids” and “Read to Rover.” After an initial interview with Melissa that included the questions presented above, I conducted a follow-up interview in order to gather greater detail about particular topics, specifically in relation to the pediatric dog training process, the history and structure of “K-9’s for Kids” and
“Read to Rover,” along with her role in and experience with these programs. Melissa and the two handlers were individually interviewed at Sandy Meadow Farm Dog Obedience School and the two teachers were individually interviewed at the schools they presently work at in Western Massachusetts. The interviews lasted between ten and thirty minutes.

**Data Analysis**

My examination of the interviews was completed by carefully conducting a thematic analysis for both the child participant group and for the adult participant group. Throughout this process, one of the most critical aspects of my analysis was to consistently represent the participants’ voices and words appropriately and honestly. Thus, while I aimed to reveal themes and draw connections between the participants’ perspectives and experiences, I did so, to the greatest extent possible, without making assumptions about what the participants chose to share in their interviews.

My analysis of the interviews was based around my primary research question, which focused on investigating children’s and adults’ experiences with and perspectives on a canine-assisted reading program, and whether or not dogs can be considered beneficial members of school communities. Since this study is exploratory in nature due to the lack of qualitative research on this topic, my analysis strived to shed light on these questions, and to offer individuals’ personal accounts as insight.

Once the interviews were conducted and audio recorded, I then meticulously transcribed each recording into written form, which allowed for a closer data analysis. Aside from Melissa Kielbasa, who gave permission for her real name to be used, every other participant was given a pseudonym to ensure their privacy. The following discussion of the data analysis process will
encompass the child and adult groups, as the process of analysis was the same for both groups. However, these two groups were analyzed separately from one another.

By rereading and re-listening to each interview, I found many themes to naturally emerge as a result of the questions being asked and from the responses that the participants chose to share. From here, I began extracting quotations for my thematic analysis based on several criteria. The initial two criteria were most important during the individual analysis of each interview, and the third criterion was important when looking across the interviews. The first criterion concerned whether the quotation or summary of the participant’s idea was particularly relevant to the existing literature on canine-assisted therapy for children. For instance, if the child or adult mentioned how the dog positively influenced social or academic confidence, I would extract that section, as this concept is discussed in the present literature. The second criterion included an investigation of what the participants seemed to find particularly interesting or significant. This was done primarily by listening to the audio recordings and noticing areas where they placed particular emphasis or by noticing where their tone and/or level of excitement increased. Additionally, a participant would at times explicitly state how interesting, special, or fun something was, in which case I would extract that quotation, as this was something significant for that individual, which was thus important to my research given my focus on participants’ perspectives and experiences.

The third criterion was critical when looking across the interviews from the child group and across the interviews from the adult group. This was the final step in my data analysis, which focused on my realization that similar words, topics, experiences, and interests were being discussed in various interviews, which I interpreted as central to my thematic analysis. Once quotations and ideas were extracted from each interview, I then began to group similar
quotations and ideas into themes, separately for the child and adult groups. Following this, I established several main themes for each group, which encompassed various specific sub-themes. This organization will become clear in the Analysis chapter, which will reveal the main themes and sub-themes for the child and adult participants.

In the following chapter, I will present my thematic analysis of children’s and adults’ experiences with and perspectives on a canine-assisted reading program, which will be supported by excerpts and examples from the interviews. From here, I will provide a discussion in the final chapter that offers conclusions to my study while drawing connections between my research and the existing literature.
Chapter 3: Analysis

In the present chapter, my analysis of the interviews is presented in order to reveal the themes that emerged across the participants’ narrative accounts of their experiences within the “Read to Rover” program. The purpose of this chapter is to gain an understanding of how a canine-assisted reading program is experienced by children receiving the services and by adults involved in the process, which has not been thoroughly investigated in the existing literature on canine-assisted therapy. The child interviews and adult interviews are discussed separately in this analysis, as the two groups experience the program from distinct perspectives. That is, the children who were interviewed are students who receive the services offered by “Read to Rover,” whereas the adults are involved with the program either as dog handlers or as teachers. Thus, the children have the actual experience of reading to the dogs and the adults facilitate the reading sessions and have the opportunity to observe the children’s interactions with the dogs. This distinction is important to make when considering the perspectives from which each participant is speaking, and is thus important to the organization of this thematic analysis.

Also critical to remember throughout the following discussion is that while the interviews were analyzed and themes were extracted to represent similar topics that arose across interviews, each individual participant holds their own unique perspective of and experiences with the “Read to Rover” program. So, while a thematic analysis is incredibly helpful in discovering what topics may be of particular value, based on what specific topics were addressed in the interviews, it is important to not lose sight of the children’s and adults’ individual voices. Therefore, in this analysis I strive to carefully represent each participant’s voice and attend to the reality that they all have various personal histories, beliefs, and levels of experience with the program.
For the present thematic analysis, the children’s interviews will be discussed first, followed by the analysis of the adults’ interviews. In both sections, introductions will reveal relevant background information and the organization of analysis will be established. The main themes will also be identified for each group, within which will fall the numerous sub-themes. Interestingly, in my analysis of the children’s and adults’ interviews, the same three main themes emerged: “Children’s Learning,” “Comfort and Connection,” and “Dogs in School.” While this reveals an intriguing similarity between the groups, which will be discussed later, each group brought unique perspectives to these themes and thus the viewpoints represented in the children’s section are significant and distinct from those represented in the adult’s section, and vice versa.

Analysis of the Children’s Interviews

In the present study, four elementary-aged children, including two girls and two boys, were interviewed about their experiences with the “Read to Rover” canine-assisted reading program. To ensure their privacy, all of the children have been given pseudonyms, which were chosen from lists of the most popular baby names from around the years that they were born. The child participants included two third graders: Noah and Olivia, and two fifth graders: Madeline and Christopher.

As mentioned in the Methodology chapter, three of the children (Olivia, Madeline, and Christopher) had limited experience with Melissa and her certified pediatric therapy dog, which was the dog-handler pair that visited during this study due to a staff absence. Noah, however, received three visits every other week from three different dog-handler pairs, including Melissa and her dog, and was therefore familiar with this team. However, I do not believe this slight
unfamiliarity for some of the children adversely affected my interviews. All of the children appeared eager to have their reading session, and upon seeing their canine-reading partner, each child smiled and warmly greeted and stroked her. Each child also engaged in conversation with Melissa before (e.g. about the child’s day or chosen reading material), during (e.g. to ask questions about words), and after (e.g. in anticipation of the next visit) each of their “Read to Rover” visits, which may indicate a sense of comfort that they felt in this setting. Thus, I believe my observations reveal that these children were both comfortable with and enthusiastic about their canine-assisted reading session, even when the dog-handler team was somewhat unfamiliar to them. In fact, this may provide evidence to show that the children feel comfortable reading with multiple “Read to Rover” dogs.

Through analyzing the children’s interviews, I identified three main themes that emerged as prominent topics that all of the children spoke about. As mentioned in the overall introduction to this chapter, these three themes ended up being the same themes that were identified in my analysis of the adults’ interviews: “Children’s Learning,” “Comfort and Connection,” and “Dogs in School.” Despite this similarity, it is important to remember that the children, like the adults, were speaking from their unique experiences, and thus offered different perspectives on these themes in comparison to the adults.

Within the three main thematic categories, the significance of each theme will first be established, followed by a more in-depth investigation into relevant sub-themes. In each sub-theme section, ideas and excerpts from the children’s interviews will be presented, and my interpretation of these findings will be offered. While the children did not elaborate on their responses in the same way that the adults did, their comments still have much to offer to our understanding of their experiences. In many ways, their answers present a wide range of
perspectives on the topic of canine-assisted reading for children, and within these multi-layered responses are various intriguing remarks that are explored in this section. In the following excerpts from the interviews, children are referred to by their pseudonyms and the interviewer (myself) is A.

**Children’s Learning**

The theme of “Children’s Learning” emerged in each of the children’s interviews, such that all four of the child participants described some way in which “Read to Rover” has positively supported their learning and has improved their reading abilities. Most of the children specifically revealed that they feel as though their reading fluency has been enhanced through the program, although the context in which these children described fluency slightly differed. In other words, while they brought up similar topics, each child had their own experiences and perspective on this aspect of the program, which was reflected in their responses. Thus, there was both a consistency across their interviews as well as a clear sense of individuality.

While later in the interview I explicitly asked two of the children if they thought that their reading has changed since they began participating in the program, two children spontaneously mentioned how their reading abilities have improved in response to my first question regarding what they like about reading to their canine partner. This is important not only because all of the children expressed that their reading has been enhanced through the program, but also because two of the four children associated their improved reading skills with what they like about reading to the dog. Although each of the children revealed slightly different ways in which their reading has been positively affected through their participation in the program, ranging from
feeling more calm when reading to learning new words, three out of the four children used the term “fluent” or “fluency” to describe some of these improvements.

For Noah (Grade 3), Olivia (Grade 3), and Madeline (Grade 5), fluency was an aspect of their reading that they felt was being helped during their visits with their canine reading partner. For instance, in addition to describing his visits from the dog as being a “treat” in response to the question of what he likes about the program (which will be discussed later), Noah also reported that “it helps you get more fluent, too.” Our conversation continued:

Noah: I feel like I’m getting better with my reading.

A: Mhm, and what about your reading do you feel like you're getting better at?

Noah: Uh, that I’m getting better at not making it like, going fast, but not like, not so fast that you can't understand me.

A: So it helps you slow down a little bit?

Noah: Yeah.

Here, Noah elaborates on what he means by “getting better.” He describes how reading to the dog helps him regulate the speed at which he reads, which he appears to understand is an important skill when reading, since he states “not so fast that you can’t understand me.” Thus, he knows that reading too fast can make it difficult for listeners to understand him. However, by reading to the dog, he reports getting better at controlling his reading pace, a benefit of the program that he enjoys.

Although a different improvement from what Noah revealed, Olivia (Grade 3) also expressed a positive change in her reading in response to the question of what she likes about her visits with the dog. Olivia described that her reading is getting better because reading to the dog makes her feel “more calm” than reading in front of a person. This calmness and comfort brought on by the presence of the dog will be discussed in one of the following sections;
however, when asked to elaborate on the specific changes that she has noticed in her reading, Olivia described:

Olivia: Um, because at [unknown reference] when I read a book, when I need to read a book out loud, I kinda like, get a little like twitchy when I read. Like, I kinda got twitchy on this book, but when I read with the dog, I get a little more like fluency when I read the book.

A: So the words come out easier?

Olivia: Yeah.

In this excerpt, Olivia describes her difficulty with reading aloud, which is one of the primary goals of “Read to Rover,” to provide students with another opportunity to practice their oral reading skills. She explains that she gets “twitchy” when she reads out loud, but confirms that in the presence of her canine reading partner, the words come out easier and there is more “fluency” when she reads.

Madeline (Grade 5), who expressed a love for reading and for animals, also shared that by participating in “Read to Rover” her reading is “more fluent.” Furthermore, she stated: “We don't do much reading out loud in the classroom, so this gives me an extra chance to do the reading.” Thus, the additional time that is reserved for her to read one-on-one with a dog is a time during which she is able to practice and improve on her fluency skills. Lastly, Christopher (Grade 5) also noted the positive effects that the program has on his reading, in that through this additional reading support, he is “learning new words” and is “reading faster.”

Thus, while all of the children interviewed in this study expressed impacts of “Read to Rover” that were entirely positive, it is critical to attend to the diversity of their responses. For instance, even though three out of the four children expressed fluency as being an improvement that they have noticed through reading with their canine partner, they each talked about this in a slightly different way. So, although it is a clear theme that these students have recognized
regarding the positive effects of their visits with their canine reading partners, their individual voices and experiences must also be appreciated and appropriately represented.

**Comfort and Connection**

Another theme that emerged across all of the children’s interviews about their experiences in “Read to Rover” was that of “Comfort and Connection.” Not only did all of the children describe a sense of comfort and happiness that they feel when reading to their canine reading partner, but they all also shared feelings about the program that revealed the positive connections that they have formed with the “Read to Rover” dogs. It is worth noting that in the interviews, I did not explicitly ask any of the children if they feel comfortable or close to their canine-reading partner, rather, these themes naturally arose from broader and more neutral questions, such as “What do you like or dislike about the dog?” From our conversations, the following two sub-themes were identified and will be thoroughly investigated: “Creating a Sense of Comfort when Reading” and “Children’s Positive Associations with Dogs.”

**Creating a Sense of Comfort when Reading**

In response to my first question in each of the interviews, regarding what the children like or dislike about “Read to Rover,” all of the participants revealed some level of comfort or pleasure that they find in the visits with their canine reading partner. As discussed in the previous section, Noah (Grade 3) and Olivia (Grade 3) both responded to this question in part by describing their improved reading skills. However, they also expressed other positive associations with the program. While all of the children revealed pleasurable feelings about reading to the dog, each individual child shared slightly different reasons for why they like these
visits. For instance, their responses ranged from describing how “Read to Rover” combines two interests into one, to expressing how the visits help create feelings of relaxation.

Their levels of elaboration also varied greatly, as Noah (Grade 3) claimed that he likes the visits because “it’s cool,” while Olivia (Grade 3) described in detail how the visits make her feel “more calm.”

I like it because I can actually read to the dog. And like, if someone like... I like to pet him because it makes me more calm, because I wouldn't want to pet a person. It's really fuzzy so it makes me, like, better to read, because I get more calm. Because when I read in front of someone I get a little, like, freaked out, because if I’m doing it wrong or right. So when I have the dog, the dog doesn't talk, so I just feel better reading to it.

In this excerpt, Olivia reveals two especially interesting elements regarding why she likes reading to the dog and how this comforts her. In the first few sentence, she expresses that she likes reading to the dog, and goes on to explain that by petting the dog she feels “more calm,” and by becoming “more calm” her reading improves. Thus, we can trace how she understands her reading process and how her reading skills improve. She displays an understanding of the importance of feeling calm when reading (“it makes me, like, better to read, because I get more calm”) and reveals that the dog, specifically petting the dog, helps her become calmer. Later in the excerpt (“Because when I read in front of someone...”), Olivia shares that she gets nervous when reading to people because of how they might judge or critique her abilities, as she gets “freaked out” about whether she’s “doing it wrong or right.” However, when reading to her canine reading partner, she expresses that the dog relieves her of that scared feeling. She explains that “the dog doesn’t talk, so I just feel better reading to it,” meaning that the dog is not critiquing her in the same way that a person might, and because of this, she feels more comfortable reading out loud.
Furthermore, according to Madeline (Grade 5), “Read to Rover” is “like the perfect combination” of interests. That is, the program is an opportunity that joins two things together that she enjoys. When asked what she thinks about reading to the dog, she replied: “Well, I've always loved reading, and I love animals, so it's like the perfect combination.” Our conversation continued:

A: Yeah! It gives you time to read with a dog there too. And how do you feel when you read to the dogs?

Madeline: Well I feel happy.

For Madeline, reading to her canine reading partner is something that makes her feel “happy,” perhaps in part because it combines two of her interests into one activity. Her use of the word “happy” is worth noting, as this positive emotion is something that she associates with her visits with the dog. Thus, “Read to Rover” creates a pleasurable time in her day that allows her to engage with two things that she loves, reading and animals.

For Christopher (Grade 5), reading to his canine reading partner reminds him of his dog, which he affirms helps him relax:

A: What do you think about your visits with the dog?

Christopher: Um, it reminds me of my dog when I'm reading to them. It feels like I'm relaxing to everyone. Well yeah, to all the dogs.

A: So being with the dogs helps you relax a little bit?

Christopher: Yeah.

Here, it is important to note that not only does Christopher express that the visits make him think of his dog, but that there is also a level of comfort that he feels from the dog’s presence. Had he only said that reading to the dog makes him think of his dog, it could not necessarily be interpreted as a positive or comforting time, as his relationship with his dog at home is unknown.
However, he immediately follows this statement with “It feels like I’m relaxing to everyone,” which may indicate a positive connection between the visits and feelings of relaxation. There is perhaps another layer of complexity here also, specifically in reference to his use of the word “to” (“to everyone” and “to all the dogs”). This may indicate an audience that he feels he has when reading during the visits, and thus that he is “relaxing” to this audience (which he specifies with “to all the dogs,” not just “to everyone”). Or, this could refer to his feeling that he is “relaxing” in response to multiple dogs’ presence, as he has read to two different dogs throughout his “Read to Rover” experience.

Overall, the four children shared diverse ways in which the presence of the dog fosters positive feelings, specifically by creating feelings of happiness and comfort when reading. None of the children articulated their perspectives in the exact same way, which reveals the individual and personal experience of the “Read to Rover” sessions. Furthermore, even though the children were able to express any negative experiences or perspectives that they associate with the visits, they chose to share only positive stories. This is telling, and makes clear that these children do hold many positive feelings about visiting with and reading to the dog.

**Children’s Positive Associations with Dogs**

An additional theme that appeared among all of the interviews with the child participants was that of forming positive associations with dogs. Three of the four children reported having pets at home, but only one of them (Christopher) reported having a pet dog. Thus, it is interesting to gain an understanding of what these children think about their canine reading partner, particularly because most of them do not have a dog at home. As discussed in the previous section, all of the children described positive feelings about their visits with the dog, specifically
when reading to the dog, and used words like “cool,” “happy,” “relaxed,” and “calm” to describe their experiences. In addition to this, the children also made remarks that reveal other positive associations that they experience with their canine reading partner, but not exclusively in relation to reading to the dog. For instance, across the interviews, the children mentioned that the “Read to Rover” dogs are “soft” and “nice and quiet.”

Both Christopher (Grade 5) and Olivia (Grade 3) reported how “soft” and “fuzzy” the dogs’ fur is and that they enjoy petting the dogs when the dogs visit them (as they both have read to two different “Read to Rover” dogs). This appeared to give these children a pleasant association with the dogs that visit their school. Additionally, Noah (Grade 3) and described how “cool” it is to spend time with the dogs:

> It's cool to see some tricks that they do. Cause they will do a trick, and cause sometimes they [the handlers] will give me a cookie or something that they eat, and like, the tricks that they know, they will do, and I will give them a cookie after they do it.

Here, Noah describes his involvement with the “Read to Rover” dogs beyond the time that he spends reading to them. He shows interest in seeing the tricks that the dogs can do and shared how he can also get the dog to do tricks. Later in the interview, when I asked Noah if he would try teaching his Grandmother’s dog some tricks (which he had mentioned), he expressed hesitation because “her dog is really wild.” This might reveal something special about the dogs in “Read to Rover,” specifically regarding their behavior, as at least one child feels that he can interact with a “Read to Rover” dog in a way that he may not be able to with a dog that is not in the program.

Furthermore, Olivia (Grade 3) also described the positive connection that has been built between her and her canine reading partner, and like Noah (Grade 3), she also made note of the dog’s good behavior. She explained:
It's really cool because sometimes like, there's no pets allowed any place, and I don't have a dog, so it's kinda, I kinda know how it feels to have a dog, but I don't really have a dog. Like, it's not one of the dogs that bark or it's not the loud loud ones. It's nice and quiet.

In this excerpt, Olivia shares that while she does not have a dog of her own, by participating in “Read to Rover” she now knows a little bit of what it feels like to have a dog. This is an opportunity that she enjoys (“It’s really cool”), and she is able to build a connection with a dog that is well-behaved instead of “one of those dogs that bark.” By creating this positive association with a dog, she has built upon her understanding of dogs in general, since this experience has shown her that not all dogs are “loud,” but that some are “nice and quiet.” Further, she has been given a glimpse of what it feels like to have a well-behaved dog of her own, an additional benefit of her bi-weekly visits from her canine reading partner.

Together, the children interviewed in this study expressed several different types of positive associations with the dogs in “Read to Rover.” This program provides them with the opportunity not only to read to a certified pediatric therapy dog, which all of them expressed that they enjoy, but also to interact with a dog and form a connection with a dog in a way that they may not have previously experienced.

**Dogs in School**

The final main theme to be addressed in this analysis concerns children’s perspectives on “Dogs in School.” In all of the interviews, each child participant discussed how they felt about having “Read to Rover” dogs come to their school, which they all described with enthusiasm and positivity. Additionally, many of the children suggested that there is something special about having these dogs come to their school, specifically in being able to read to them in this setting. Through my conversations with the children on these topics, two sub-themes emerged that will
be discussed in detail: “The Special Opportunity of having Dogs Visit School” and “Reading to a Dog at School vs. Reading to an Animal at Home.”

The Special Opportunity of having Dogs Visit School

In each of the interviews, I asked the children what they thought about having a dog come to their school, to which they all replied with positive remarks. This question is important, as it attempts to bring about an understanding of how the presence of dogs in school is received by young people, which is different from investigating how children feel about their individual visits with the dog or how they feel their reading has changed from these visits. Since the question was open-ended, the children were encouraged to reply with spontaneous answers, and indeed, each child answered in unique ways. Their responses ranged from describing the individual emotion they feel from having a “Read to Rover” dog come to their school, to explaining it as a “privilege” and a “good opportunity.”

When prompted with the question of what he thinks about having dogs visit his school to read with students, Christopher (Grade 5) revealed that he feels “happy.” Noah (Grade 3) also expressed positive feelings about having “Read to Rover” dogs come to his school. He replied: “I think this is really fun and a good opportunity for kids.” Here, not only does he express his individual feeling about having the dogs visit his school, which he states as being “really fun,” but he also reveals his opinion about what the program offers to “kids” in general, which of the four children, only he brought up. This is important to note because it shows that he is thinking beyond himself and his individual emotions. That is, he is considering how the program can potentially impact other children. This shows that Noah believes “Read to Rover” is both a “fun” experience for him, as well as a “good opportunity” for other children.
Earlier in his interview, Noah also described how “It's sort of a treat having the dog right next to you.” Again, this shows the pleasurable nature of his visits with the dog, and perhaps that these visits are something that he perceives as special, as something that doesn’t happen everyday, and as something that he looks forward to. To him, the time he spends with the dog is “a treat.”

Similar to Noah’s response is how Madeline (Grade 5) replied to the question of what she thinks about having a dog come to her school. She said, “Well, I feel privileged because most people can't do that.” This too, displays that she feels there is something special about having the dog visit her school. However, whereas Noah described this “treat” specifically in relation to his visits with the dog, Madeline used the word “privilege” to reveal her understanding that most children do not have this same opportunity. While she could have said she feels good or happy because she knows that most people can’t do this, she specifically used the term “privileged.” I believe this shows that she recognizes the reality that she is able to do something in her school that children in other schools may not, or even other children in her own school.

Furthermore, as discussed in a previous section, Olivia (Grade 3) revealed that having dogs come to her school is “really cool because sometimes like, there's no pets allowed any place, and I don't have a dog, so it's kinda, I kinda know how it feels to have a dog…” Again, this also shows that she understands that having dogs visit her school through “Read to Rover” is something unique, since dogs are typically not allowed in places like schools. Through this special opportunity, she has been given the chance to feel what it’s like to have a dog of her own.

Overall, the students interviewed in this study shared their positive feelings and perspectives on having reading assistance dogs come to their school. Each of them reported that
this is an opportunity that they feel good about, and many of them shared comments that reveal the special nature of having “Read to Rover” dogs visit their school.

**Reading to a Dog at School vs. Reading to an Animal at Home**

Since three of the four child participants shared with me that they have at least one pet at home, I was interested in learning about whether or not they also read to their pets at home. While all of the children expressed fondness for their “Read to Rover” visits, Noah (Grade 3), Christopher (Grade 5), and Madeline (Grade 5), all of whom reported having a pet, expressed that they have never read to their animals at home. Across their interviews, they shared several reasons for why they do not read to their pets at home and instead, prefer reading to the dogs at school.

For instance, Noah (Grade 3) expressed little interest in reading to his two cats at home. He said that he has never tried reading to them, and when asked if he would try reading to them at home, he muttered, “Umm, nahh…” I then questioned if he would rather just do this in school, to which he agreed. However, both Christopher (Grade 5) and Madeline (Grade 5) expressed more specific reasons for why they do not read to their pets at home. When asked if he reads to his dog at home, Christopher said, “Um, no. Because some of them, well one of them likes to um, be with my brother and he licks a lot. And the other one is dead because of something.” In Christopher’s experience, his dog may not be available for him to read to at home. Since his dog likes to be around his brother, Christopher may feel as though he does not have the opportunity to read to his dog. Furthermore, because he notes that his dog also licks a lot, this could be a distraction to Christopher when trying to read, which is something that in my observations of the visits, the “Read to Rover” dog did not do.
Similarly, Madeline’s (Grade 5) response to this question also suggested that her cat at home might not be the right fit for a reading partner. When asked if she has ever tried reading to her pet, she shook her head “no” and replied: “She won't listen. She'll pretty much just sit in my lap. She's very mellow because she's getting older.” Here, Madeline’s first comment is that her cat would not listen to her if she were to try reading to her, which may indicate that listening is an important quality that she attributes to her canine reading partner at school. I followed up by asking her if she feels like the “Read to Rover” dogs listen to her when she reads, to which she replied “Mhm,” in agreement. This is significant, as this confirms that she does believe that the dogs who come to her school play a special role as a listener during in her reading time as a listener, which her cat at home would not provide her with.

Through these conversations with the children, it became clear that there are likely qualities of the “Read to Rover” dogs that make them especially good reading partners, which, to the children, might be missing in their pets at home. The children expressed hesitation in reading to their pets at home, despite enjoying the time during which they read to their canine partners at school. Additionally, there may also be something significant about the “Read to Rover” sessions taking place at their school. Thus, their responses may indicate that there are special characteristics of the “Read to Rover” visits that the children feel would not be fulfilled from their animals at home.

From these interviews, four children’s perspectives on their experiences in a canine-assisted reading program have been investigated. Overall, these children shared numerous ways in which “Read to Rover” is a positive and beneficial program for them, specifically in relation to their reading abilities, sense of comfort, and school environment. Although their interviews were brief, they responded with and raised many interesting and important feelings and ideas,
which offers insight into how they experience this program. In their interviews, many similarities arose, specifically in relation to the overall positivity that they expressed in relation to “Read to Rover” and the time they spend with their canine reading partner. Within these similarities however, are their individual voices and unique perspectives, which are critical to recognize and appreciate. This will continue to be of importance in the next section that investigates the adults’ interviews, and will be discussed even further in the final Discussion chapter.

Analysis of the Adults’ Interviews

A total of five adults were interviewed for this study about their experiences with and perspectives on the “Read to Rover” program. As with the child participants, pseudonyms have been used to ensure the privacy of each participant, with the exception of Melissa Kielbasa, founder and director of the “K-9’s for Kids Pediatric Therapy Unit” and dog handler for “Read to Rover,” who gave permission for me to use her real name. In addition to Melissa, two other “Read to Rover” dog handlers were interviewed: Sandra, who has been involved with “Read to Rover” since 2005; and Betty, who has been involved with the program since 2013. Furthermore, two elementary school teachers were also interviewed: Caroline, who has been involved with “Read to Rover” since 2003; and Amanda, who was involved with the program between 2003 and 2011. While the dog handlers are present during “Read to Rover” visits while the child reads aloud to the dog, the teachers interviewed in this study typically are not, although they work with many of the children in the program and also have played a vital role in the development and organization of “Read to Rover” at their school. So, while the adults have varying amounts of experience with “Read to Rover” and also have different roles in the program, the main themes discussed in this section emerged across all of the interviews.
In this analysis of the adults’ interviews, the three main themes that will be investigated are the same themes that arose in my analysis of the children’s interviews, including: “Children’s Learning,” “Comfort and Connection,” and “Dogs in School.” In each of these three categories, an introduction will establish the overall significance of the theme, and a more specific exploration into various relevant sub-themes will follow, which are specific to the adult interviews. Regarding these sub-themes, excerpts from the interviews will be provided to display examples of the adults’ perspectives on the topic, and my interpretation of these quotations will be offered. This analysis will begin to reveal both the similarities and differences between the adults’ and the children’s interviews, which will be discussed in detail in the Discussion chapter.

**Children’s Learning**

The theme of “Children’s Learning” emerged in all five of my interviews with the adult participants, such that each adult described some extent of the impact that they believe the children’s participation in “Read to Rover” has had on various aspects of their learning and development. For instance, some adults expressed how the program has positively affected children by providing them with additional reading fluency practice, while others described the positive changes in children’s desire to read and in their confidence in reading. Furthermore, some adults reported stories of how the program has encouraged children to learn in ways beyond reading. Because different topics were addressed that all held relevance to children’s learning, I established the following three sub-themes to organize this data, including: “Developing Reading Skills and Confidence,” “Gaining the Desire to Read,” and “Learning Beyond Reading.”
Developing Reading Skills and Confidence

Upon being asked to comment on whether they have noticed any changes in the children who are involved in the “Read to Rover” program, all five of the adult participants in this study discussed the positive impacts that the program has had either on students’ reading skills or on their confidence in reading. Their responses ranged from describing children’s improvements in reading fluency to the way in which their comfort with reading has been positively affected over the course of the program. For instance, Caroline (teacher) explained how “Read to Rover” provides children with the opportunity for extra fluency practice, since the visits are a designated time for children to read something of their choice out loud. This fluency practice was also described by one of the handlers, Betty, who revealed her experiences (which will be discussed in greater detail later) with a third grader whose reading drastically smoothed out and “kept a rhythm” as she stroked her canine reading partner.

Furthermore, Melissa (director/handler) described how in addition to noticing improvements in children’s reading fluency, she has also found that students in the program become more comfortable with asking for help when reading. She noted that this development is important, even if children have just grown more comfortable with her, because “it's one more person that in a difficult area of their life they've felt comfortable enough with to ask for assistance.” So, whereas a child might have previously avoided certain words or skipped pages that appeared too difficult, reading with a dog in this program has perhaps helped that child gain the comfort and confidence to ask for assistance when they need it.

This change in comfort and confidence is critical to improving children’s reading skills, particularly because, according to Amanda (teacher), “there's a direct link between children's ability to comprehend what they're reading and their ability to be able to decode fluently.” In
other words, there is a connection between children’s word recognition skills and their understanding of the text. Amanda went on to explain:

If children are having difficulties just sounding words out, they're investing all of their energy into that and not thinking about what they're reading. So it's just like anything else, it's practice. If you want to become a really good pitcher in baseball, you've just gotta throw a lot of balls. It's the same thing with reading. By providing children with an opportunity for extra reading out loud practice, it really helps build fluency, thus building comprehension.

With this, it becomes clear that the “Read to Rover” program offers students an additional and alternative opportunity to practice their reading in order to build not only fluency, but also comprehension. As they practice reading aloud every other week with the dog, the children in “Read to Rover” build upon their skills and knowledge that they gain from other settings and classroom lessons.

With respect to whether or not the children involved in the program display measurable improvements in their reading when their reading skills are measured, Amanda (teacher) stated:

There wasn't any real tremendous change in fluency. We use an assessment called the DIBELS, it tracks kids' oral reading fluency, accuracy, and rate. I would say I would not have seen any difference in the data in terms of children who were going to read to the dog.

However, Amanda noted that this may be related to the frequency at which the children visit with their canine reading partner. Since most of the students in the program meet with the dog only once every other week, she said, “It's not often enough to help really promote fluency.”

However, when asked if she noticed any academic changes in the children involved with “Read to Rover,” Caroline (teacher) said, “I think that would really be a challenge to attribute to ‘Read to Rover.’ We haven't done any experiments to isolate that as a direct link. So I would be hesitant to say yes or no because that study hasn't been done.” Thus, whether or not these bi-
weekly visits from a pediatric therapy dog improves academic reading scores is unclear, although discovering this specific piece of information was not the aim of the current study.

Despite this uncertainty regarding the measurable effects that “Read to Rover” may have on children’s reading, Amanda (teacher) went on to describe the clear changes she noticed regarding the students’ confidence in reading. She claimed that, “definitely [emphasis in voice quality] at the reading table, when you had your small group instruction and you had those six children in front of you, you could definitely see in most of the children who participated a difference in their confidence.” Thus, even though in her experience Amanda did not find any significant improvements in their measured reading skills, she, like the four other adults in this study, emphasized the positive impact that “Read to Rover” has on children’s comfort and confidence with reading.

**Gaining the Desire to Read**

In addition to noticing changes in children’s comfort and confidence with reading, three of the five adults also emphasized how “Read to Rover” may help children gain the *desire* to read, thus motivating children to pick up reading material. Caroline (teacher) and Sandra (handler) both mentioned how children in “Read to Rover” look forward to reading with the dog, whereas they would not have otherwise read aloud to anyone else. Specifically, Caroline reported that because the children have a dog to read to, this “non-threatening audience” allows and encourages children to build upon their motivation to read.

Melissa (director/handler) also described her experience with children in the program who have developed the desire to read:
[This is] huge for the kids that are struggling with reading skills. It can be really tough to get children to pick up the book and to get them to actually want to read, because there's just no desire. But they know they're coming to see the dog. They know that their dog friend is coming to read with them, so they're actually going to the library and looking for books and pulling books from the teacher's selection, which teachers will say to me they couldn't get them to do that before, that they just didn't want to. So now we're finding that this is just opening up that desire to read.

Again, this shows how the canine-assisted reading program provides students with an alternative opportunity to read, an opportunity that they appear to be excited and eager about. In anticipation of the visit from their reading partner, Melissa reports they express an interest in finding a book to share with the dog. Where they may have been hesitant to read and would avoid entering the library to look for books prior to the “Read to Rover” program, their desire to read and to seek out books increases when they have the positive association and anticipation of reading to the dog. Thus, as children learn to become more comfortable and confident with reading in the “Read to Rover” program, they may also be developing a newly found desire to read.

**Learning Beyond Reading**

In addition to the changes in their confidence with reading, three out of the five adults also expressed ways in which “Read to Rover” can encourage children to learn and actively engage with learning in other ways beyond reading. For instance, Betty (handler) explained how during the reading sessions, conversations can transpire about words that the children are not familiar with. Here, the handler and child can talk about words and their meaning, and through this the child not only gains an understanding of what they are reading, but the child can also then carry that new knowledge with them outside of the reading context. This increase in
vocabulary was also documented in my interview with Caroline (teacher), who expressed how important it is for the children in the program to have someone they can ask questions to while reading, as this, along with the additional reading time that the program gives children, can help to improve their vocabulary.

Melissa (director/handler) also described a specific instance that revealed another way in which students in the program may learn in ways beyond reading, and even challenge themselves to engage with material that may be difficult for them. She expressed how a young girl who struggled very much with reading words, but loved music and read sheet music very well, would bring music to the “Read to Rover” sessions and Melissa would encourage her to read the lyrics. Melissa explained:

She actually played flute, so she would come in every once in a while and I'd have her play something. She actually, by the end of the year, she wrote a song for my dog. Which was really, really cool because she not only wrote the music but she also wrote the lyrics. Her mother had sent this beautiful note to the school saying how wonderful that was, that her daughter took the time to write the words- she always writes the music but never put words to the music, and this time she actually put the words to the music and she performed it for us on our last time together.

This story reveals that the child was inspired to work on something in a way that she had not previously done, as she had never previously written words to any of her songs. Thus, there was something special about the program that encouraged her to challenge herself to integrate her interest in music with her literacy skills, which appears to have been something that she struggled with. She perhaps grew a greater comfort in her abilities through her participation in “Read to Rover” and looked forward to the opportunity for when she could share her song with her canine reading partner. In this way, she was not only able to practice her reading skills at
school, but she was also motivated to continue her learning at home and to challenge herself to integrate literacy with her musical skills.

Overall, all of the adults shared numerous ways in which children’s learning is positively affected through their participation in “Read to Rover.” From describing the ways in which children’s reading skills and reading confidence can be built upon to explaining how children can gain the desire to read through their participation in the program, the adults revealed many elements of children’s learning that they have seen to be positively impacted by “Read to Rover.”

**Comfort and Connection**

In addition to the adults’ descriptions of how “Read to Rover” can benefit children’s learning in multiple ways, all five adults also commented on some aspect of “Comfort and Connection” with respect to children’s interactions and bonds with the certified pediatric therapy dogs. For instance, some of the adults revealed stories about the special connections they have observed between children in the program and their canine reading partner, and others described how important the tactile reinforcement of petting the dog can be for some children. Furthermore, all of the adults expressed how significant the dog’s presence is in the reading sessions, and how the program can truly help some children blossom in terms of their self-esteem. As these various topics pertaining to comfort and connection became more clear in my analysis of the adults’ interviews, I established the following three sub-themes to organize the data, including: “The Power of Presence and Touch,” “Fostering Personal Comfort and Social Self-Esteem,” and “A Special Connection.”
The Power of Presence and Touch

The presence of the dogs in this reading program makes “Read to Rover” unique from most traditional reading support programs, and all five of the adult participants commented on how special this opportunity is for the children. Amanda (teacher) stated that “Read to Rover” “gives the children this really safe environment. You know, you've got this dog who's just unconditional love, eighty pounds of unconditional love, who will just listen to you read and not criticize or make you feel less in any way.” The children enter a safe space with the “Read to Rover” dogs, a space where they are not judged when they read, a space where they can sit next to the dog who will just listen and offer a positive connection.

Betty (handler), shared her experience with how a dog’s physical presence can have a powerful effect on a child’s reading, specifically while the child is petting the dog:

My favorite memory that brought out the whole real reason you're doing it was the little girl [Emily]. And she's just as cute as a bug. The first time I met with her she said, "I don't read very well." And I said, "That's okay. [Rover] just wants you to read to him. He won't care." "Well I kinda miss words and I get nervous..." And I said, "He is just so excited to hear you read." So she started and she was kind of all over the place and stumbling and floundering He was laying right next to her and you know just like snuggled and they sit on a little pillow.

Here, Betty describes a child who felt very self-conscious about reading, who expressed nervousness and uncertainty about her ability to read aloud. However, with the reassurance that Betty gave her about her canine reading partner just wanting to hear her read, she was able to begin reading and was perhaps freed from some of her self-criticism regarding her reading abilities. Thus, this may display the positive emotional connection that this student felt from the presence of the dog. Betty continued:
He's snuggled up next to her and she was just a little bit nervous and everything else. And she, I don't even think she realized she did it, but her hand came over and just started rubbing him. She was up by his head and she just kind of just took an ear, and you know how you just stroke their ears? It was eerie [emphasis in voice quality] to see, as she started doing it, it was almost with each stroke the inflexions became quieter, they became smoothed out. She started reading and it sort of hit a rhythm. It was almost like the reading kept a rhythm with her stroking the dog. And I just sat. I almost burst into tears. You know, because this [emphasis in voice quality] is what it's all about.

As Betty finished telling this story, it became apparent that this particular student’s reading was deeply affected by both the presence of the dog and by her physical contact with the dog. It was when the child was petting her canine reading partner that Betty noticed the drastic differences in her reading. By stroking the dog, the child’s reading fluency improved, and a rhythm and fluidity to her reading transpired. Betty also noted that the correspondence of stroking and greater fluidity in reading reoccurred at subsequent visits, indicating that this effect may continue.

While this experience of “the power of presence and touch” may not transpire with every child-dog pair, Caroline (teacher) also commented on this in her interview. She described how some children “need that kind of tactile reinforcement to calm themselves, because if they are a reluctant reader, having the ability to pet the dog while they’re doing this really unpleasant thing that they don't want to do, it makes it a little more palatable.” Thus, not only is the mere presence of a dog beneficial for children, as the dog becomes a nonjudgmental audience, but their physical presence is also important for children who might need and benefit from the tactile support of petting a dog.
Fostering Personal Comfort and Social Self-Esteem

Another theme that became apparent in the adults’ interviews was how children in the program can blossom in terms of their demeanor and self-esteem. All of the handlers and teachers described how through children’s participation in the program, many of them become less shy and open up more readily in the presence of the dog. For example, Sandra (handler) revealed the following story about one of her experiences in the program:

With “Read to Rover” I had a girl two years ago that, I knew there was something wrong with her but we're not allowed really to ask what their personal issues are. So halfway through the course she finally looked at me and looked at the dog and she said, "I have something to say to [Rover]."

And I said, "Okay." And she says, "[Rover], I have Asperger’s." And when she said that to her, it's just like her whole demeanor just changed. I mean, she just relaxed and she actually, we could look at each other after that, you know. That was incredible that she felt that secure.

Here it is clear that this student felt comfortable enough in this setting and with her canine reading partner to share with her a very personal aspect of her life. It is important to note that rather than telling Sandra that she had something to share with her, she directed her comment to the dog, specifically. This may indicate a certain level of trust she felt with the dog and perhaps because of this, she was able express something that she may not have shared had the dog not been present. Furthermore, Sandra noted that from this point on, the child was more relaxed during their visits and that in turn, their connection was positively affected by this moment.

In addition to noticing how children in the program have opened up in the presence of the dog, both Amanda (teacher) and Melissa (director/handler) described how the program also supports children socially and can help boost their self-esteem. Specially, Melissa described how “Read to Rover” can benefit children from a social standpoint:
[In one school] our designated reading area is not an isolated location, it's kind of a common place in a hallway that we are in, and it's really cool to see me working with a child that perhaps is a little bit shy or is one of those wallflower kids, but as all the kids walk by, they're the one with the dog! So everybody says “Hi” and then they go back to the classroom and the kids all ask about the dog and what they read. So it gives them a box to stand on and go, “I get to work with the dog! That's my dog we're working with!”

Here, Melissa describes how socially, the program can open up another door for the children. For a child who might have trouble interacting with peers, “Read to Rover” may prompt conversations between that child and their peers. For instance, their peers may ask them questions about the dog, which could be a beneficial icebreaker for a child who is shy or socially nervous. Melissa went on to describe how children may view “Read to Rover” in comparison to other academic programs:

They're being called out for a special program but it's not really a true academic program, it's a different program, and the kids look at it a little bit differently- and they all want [emphasis in voice quality] to be in the program, so when you get pulled out for that program, they all want to know about it.

Thus, the children in this program not only “want” to be visiting with the dog, which is something that many of the adults made note of, but they also might be given a greater sense of social confidence from being involved in the program. A child who is pulled out for this program is typically the only child in their classroom who is selected for “Read to Rover,” which in itself represents a special opportunity for that child. Additionally, as Melissa explained, when the child returns to class, the other students are likely curious and may engage in conversations with their peer about the “Read to Rover” visit. Thus, this may help improve children’s comfort in the classroom and foster their social self-esteem.
**A Special Connection**

Perhaps the strongest theme that emerged in each of the five interviews with the adult participants was the idea that “Read to Rover” provides children with the opportunity to form a very special connection with a four-legged friend. In fact, this theme is a common thread that appears in many of the sections of this analysis. For instance, in both the story about the girl who told her canine reading buddy that she has Asperger’s and in the story about the girl who wrote a song for the dog, it is clear that there was a unique and powerful bond between each child and the dog they read to. In every interview, the adult participants emphasized how much children look forward to the visits from the dog, and noted the smiling and excitement that the visits generate within the children.

In Caroline’s (teacher) interview, she expressed how some children are just naturally drawn to animals and are able to connect with animals in ways that they may not be able to connect with people. She described how “Read to Rover” can be especially beneficial for children who respond well to animals:

> It can be something as small as voice quality, the shy, the reader who's a good reader, but just [mumbles and whispers through words], [Read to Rover] can bring them around, too. As the handler says "Oh, so and so can't here you" "Oh well, if the dog can't hear me, I'll speak up! But if it's a human, no way!"

Here, Caroline makes it clear that the presence of the dog in the reading program is essential, as some children may be motivated to read based on the level of comfort they feel in the presence of an animal. This special connection is essential, as it can encourage children who are reluctant readers to want to read or to try to improve their reading skills.
Four of the adults also mentioned that many of the children involved in the program do not have a dog at home, so this is a particularly special opportunity for children to form a bond with a nonhuman creature over the course of a year. On this subject, Amanda (teacher) said:

[Having a pet] is a whole different facet of your life…I always told the kids, it's like reading books. When you learn to read books for pleasure, then all of a sudden this whole new aspect of your life opens up- that's what it's like, loving and having a pet. So it gave children who might not ever have that opportunity the opportunity to feel that for at least a year or half a year.

Thus, this connection can open a door for children who have not previously bonded with an animal and expose to them the pleasure and positive experiences that can come with connecting to another creature in a safe environment.

Furthermore, all of the adults expressed that some of the children in the program may have difficult home lives, and having this alternative program at school where they can read to and bond with a dog can provide them with uplifting moments in their life. Amanda (teacher) told a story about a student who faced a very traumatic home situation and through the “Read to Rover” program the child was able to connect with both the dog and the handler in a very special way. Amanda emphasized that, “You know this child will never forget that year of being in the program. I mean, ever. This will be something she will remember forever. And it just made her feel so special, which she really needed at the time.” Here, the potential long-term benefits of the program can be considered.

Melissa (director/handler) and Amanda (teacher) both expressed how teachers involved with “Read to Rover” refer students to the program not only based on students’ reading level and by considering who would benefit most from the extra practice, but also based on students’ social or personal challenges, and by considering who would benefit most from another type of connection in school. Of course, those children who are referred to the program for reading
reasons may also form just as strong bonds with their canine reading partner, but it is important to note that in some instances, children are referred to the program in the hopes that they will benefit specifically from this connection and from this extra bit of unique attention. According to Melissa, “[teachers] just want something different for [students] to experience, and to have a single-bonded relationship for the year with somebody that's not putting any pressures on them.” Thus, reading is not the exclusive focus or only area of children’s lives that could be positively affected from this program, as all of the adults who were interviewed recognized how powerfully the bonds can form between the children and dogs in “Read to Rover,” since the dogs provide the children with a safe, loving, and judgment-free space.

Together, the adults in this study revealed countless ways in which children who participate in “Read to Rover” can benefit from the presence of the dog in terms of comfort and connection. From the visits with their canine reading partner, children have the unique opportunity to build a special bond with a dog, which may in turn support the positive development of their personal comfort and confidence and social self-esteem.

**Dogs in School**

The final theme to be discussed in this analysis of the adult interviews concerns the presence of and effects of having “Dogs in School.” All of the adults described some way in which “Read to Rover” has been received by the school communities in which it is involved, including how possible concerns have been addressed within the schools along with the positive impacts that “Read to Rover” has had on the level of school culture. Because different topics were addressed that all related to having dogs in schools, I established the following two sub-
themes to organize this data, including: “Addressing Concerns with Having Dogs in Schools” and “A Part of the School Culture.”

**Addressing Concerns with Having Dogs in Schools**

Overall, each of the adults interviewed in this study expressed the great success of “Read to Rover” and how the school communities they have been involved with embrace this unique program. However, when asked about the potential issues that could come with having dogs in schools, all five of the adults mentioned two possible concerns: allergies and fear of dogs.

More so than fear of dogs, the adults identified allergies as being the most prominent potential issue when bringing a canine into a school setting. Amanda (teacher) explained that this is something that a school needs to be very careful about when considering incorporating a program like this into a public education space, since the health and safety of all students, staff, and faculty members is critical. On this topic, Melissa (director/handler) elaborated on how the potential concern of allergies is alleviated and managed in schools:

All the dogs are coming in with a fresh grooming, no topical flea products whatsoever, no shampoos, no perfumes, nothing. They have to be freshly groomed, but nothing else thrown on them… If we do have a school that has an allergy problem, but they still want the program, we may do a side-door entrance, with a room right near that side door for the dog to go into…

Normally when we go, we sign in at the front, we go collect our student from the classroom, bring them to the reading area, and bring the student back. If we're dealing with a school with an allergic child, we may not do that. We may have a room right near the office, they buzz for the child to come down- so the dog’s not walking through the hallways.

Thus, it is clear that Melissa and other individuals involved with “Read to Rover” are prepared to address and work around allergy concerns, if the school is still interested in having the program
in their community. Furthermore, Melissa also explained that oftentimes when a child is allergic to dogs, a reaction typically arises through direct contact, meaning the child would have to physically touch the dog. By having the reading visit take place in a room that is away from most of the common areas in the school, concerns regarding allergies may be greatly alleviated.

The only other potential concern that the adults brought up regarding the inclusion of dogs in schools was the possibility that students, staff, or faculty members could have an intense fear of dogs. Here, it is important to stress that the “Read to Rover” dogs who enter these school communities are very well-trained canines, and are each individually evaluated and selected for the program (which was elaborated on in the Methodology chapter). Thus, many of the adults expressed that they feel the dogs are safe, and that while it is possible for accidents to happen between the dogs and people, Sandra (handler) expressed that “I really don't think that they would ever be aggressive.” Furthermore, Amanda (teacher) stated:

I can't think of an instance of all the years that we did it that a child was terrified or anything. I just don't remember any issues with that. And I don't remember a parent not signing a permission slip to allow their child to participate in the program. There wasn't one parent who wouldn't sign it.

This shows that in Amanda’s experience, working through a child’s fear of dogs has not been a concern that she has encountered. Similarly, it appears as though parents also feel safe enough with the program to allow their child to participate, as she recalls that parents always signed the permission slips.

While Amanda (teacher) claimed to have not worked with children who are afraid of dogs, Melissa (director/handler) explained that she has worked with many children who are afraid of dogs. She described how she can identify the students who are fearful of dogs in the schools that “Read to Rover” visits, as they do not approach the dog or they freeze for a moment
in the hallway. However, she encourages them to freely move past the dog and reassures them that the dog will stay where she is. Melissa elaborated:

They've learned to get a comfort of moving past the dog at least, that the dog's not gonna come see you, nothing's gonna happen. We've even had one school where I had a teacher that was really, really afraid of dogs, and she's doing awesome. I mean, she doesn't pet them, but she can walk by them. She says good morning to us if she walks by. She used to kind of cling to the walls herself when she went by.

Again, this shows that there are ways to potentially work through or at least alleviate a student or faculty member’s fear of dogs. Furthermore, Caroline (teacher) expressed the “fringe benefit” of having the “Read to Rover” dogs visit the school, as they help to desensitize the general school population from potential fear of dogs. She described a student who was terribly afraid of dogs at the beginning of the school year, and who went from not being able to be in the same vicinity as the dog, to being able to walk comfortably by the dog. She emphasized that this child was not even participating in “Read to Rover,” but that she benefited from the program being in her school.

Of course, just as with allergy concerns, if there is a severe issue with an individual’s fear of dogs, the program may not the right fit for that particular school. This was the case in one school according to Amanda (teacher, who did not work at this particular school), who reported that “Read to Rover” visits had to stop after a teacher had a severe allergic reaction to a dog. Unfortunately, these concerns can inhibit the program from blossoming in every school community. However, throughout their interviews, all of the adults repeatedly expressed the positivity of the program and how very few issues have arose in their experiences. Rather, they described how “Read to Rover” is a special program that is embraced by each of the school communities that they have personally been involved with.
A Part of the School Culture

A final theme that appeared in three out of the five interviews with the adult participants was the positive influence that the “Read to Rover” program can have on a school community. Not only did many of the adults mention the smiles and greetings that emerge from students, staff, and faculty who see the reading assistance dog in school, but they also shared stories of how the dog has helped initiate conversations and contributes to building a sense of community beyond the one-on-one reading visits with individual children. Amanda (teacher) described her experience with how the dog impacted the school on this level:

One of the dogs would come in, and every time she would put her head right on the secretary's desk and look at her with those eyes until she got her little treat. It was so cute. They just became a part of the culture of the school. And people didn't flinch. As I was mentioning earlier, kids would be walking down the hall and you know, you see something out of the ordinary, adults as well as children are like "ooooohh!" But you know, people would just keep walking in their line and give a little pat. It was just part of the school culture. It was really lovely.

Here it seems as though the dog became a member of the school community. Her presence was familiar to everyone in the school, and Amanda interpreted this as being something positive, something “lovely.”

Additionally, Caroline (teacher) described how there is an “increased excitement” in the school because of “Read to Rover.” She, too, explained how over the years the school secretaries have bought treats for the dogs so that they could greet them and have an exchange with the handlers. Beyond this, Caroline expressed that these dogs provide the children at the school with the unique experience to witness a well-behaved working dog doing its job, something that they may not have previously come into contact with. She said, “It’s a constant visual of this special thing that’s going on.” Thus, “Read to Rover” provides individual children and school
populations in general with a unique and positive program that becomes a part of their community.

By analyzing my interviews with the five adult participants from this study, I have investigated their perspectives on and experiences with the “Read to Rover” program. When the various elements of their interviews are examined, there is clear evidence that reveals the positive impact that the program has on individual children and on school communities. From describing the ways in which children’s reading skills can be enhanced through their participation in the program to sharing stories about how children’s sense of comfort and confidence can develop from the visits, the adults offered countless examples of how the program benefits children.

Although my analysis investigated the child and adult groups separately, when looked along side one another, many similarities appear among their interviews. Perhaps the most obvious parallels between the two groups are the three main themes that I identified in my analysis of both the children’s and adults’ interviews, including: “Children’s Learning,” “Comfort and Connection,” and “Dogs in School.” These three themes represent topics that all of the participants discussed in their interviews, and beyond this, each participant shared positive perspectives and experiences pertaining to these themes. This finding is significant, and will be the focus of much of the following chapter. By bringing the two groups together, the Discussion chapter aims to make more comprehensive conclusions from the study, while also building connections between this study and the existing literature on canine-assisted therapy.
Chapter 4: Discussion

In the present study, children and adults were interviewed about their experiences with “Read to Rover,” an elementary school-based canine-assisted reading program, as an attempt to explore an area in the field of animal-assisted therapy that has not been thoroughly investigated. While considerable research has been conducted that reveals many physiological, emotional, and academic benefits of canine-assisted therapy, much of this research does not include any discussion of children’s or adults’ personal perspectives on the subject. Thus, by interviewing children and adults who have experience with a canine-assisted reading program, and by recognizing the value of listening to and sharing their narrative perspectives, this study aims to begin to fill the gap in the existing literature.

In this final chapter I will highlight many of the exciting and important findings from my study, while emphasizing what can be learned from this research. Relevant findings from the existing literature will be woven throughout this discussion, which will show not only the ways in which my research is supported by previous literature, but also the ways in which my research furthers our present understanding of canine-assisted therapy for children. First, I will underscore how similarities arose across the children’s and adults’ individual interviews, and from here I will elaborate on two other prominent findings from my research, including participants’ positive evaluations of their experiences with the program and how dogs in “Read to Rover” can be considered beneficial members of the school community. In these sections I will bring together many elements of the children’s and adults’ interviews and I will relate my findings to the existing literature on canine-assisted therapy for children. I will then offer insight into future directions for canine-assisted therapy programs for children, which will be followed by a discussion regarding the implications and limitations of my research. Finally, closing remarks
will be made that serve as a reminder for what can be learned from listening to children’s and adults’ unique experiences and perspectives.

**Similar Themes between the Children’s and Adults’ Interviews**

Through analyzing the children’s and adults’ interviews, it became clear that many parallels exist between what the children and adults chose to share in their interviews. While there were distinct sub-themes that arose within each group, there were also overarching themes that were represented across my analysis of both the children and the adults’ interviews. For instance, within the shared main themes of “Children’s Learning,” “Comfort and Connection,” and “Dogs in School,” many similar topics were brought up in *both* the child and adult interviews, including (but not limited to): the opportunity for additional oral reading practice, the enhancement of reading fluency, the benefit of increased vocabulary, the importance of the dogs’ presence in the sessions, the power of tactile reinforcement, the dogs’ good behavior, the dogs as listeners and as a nonjudgmental audience, and the program being a good opportunity for individual children and for the school as a whole. Within these similarities were each participant’s individual experiences within the program, which highlighted their unique perspectives while supporting the development of these commonalities.

Also important to briefly discuss is that among these similarities, the children and adults differed in their levels of elaboration on a given topic. In general, the adults provided more detailed reports of their experiences and perspectives, while the children offered more brief descriptions of their experiences and perspectives. Further, the ways in which the children and adults discussed some of common topics differed slightly, perhaps due to their diverse perspectives and roles in the program. For instance, whereas many of the adults’ described how
children want to read to and visit with the dogs, the children did not explicitly state this “want” in their interviews. Rather, they shared that they like reading to and visiting with the dogs for various reasons. This difference may be in part due to the reality that the adults and children experience the program from different perspectives; or, perhaps this is because the children were describing their experiences in the program in response to specific questions (one of which asked: “What do you like or not like about your visits?”), which could have elicited the use of “like” rather than “want” in their answers. Although the children’s and adults’ responses varied in this respect, I believe this still indicates a similar theme: children’s enjoyment in the “Read to Rover” sessions. The adults also shared several positive effects of the program that were not mentioned by the students, but were supported by my observations of the reading sessions. For instance, while many of the adults described how children in the program can become more comfortable with asking for assistance when reading, the children did not mention this specific topic. However, in my observations it was clear that all of the children did seek support from the dog handler during their reading session, as each of them asked clarifying questions about pronunciations and word meanings. These examples display the commonalities among the range of perspectives and responses offered by the child and adult participants.

Although the interview questions for both groups were not exactly the same, and even within the groups my follow-up questions differed between participants, many of the responses elicited from these questions were thematically related and carried a very positive tone. While it is critical to remember that each child and adult brought forth their own perspectives and experiences in the interview, it is also important to recognize the consistencies across the interviews. I believe this shows a great strength in my research, since I have not only revealed the individual experiences of children and adults who are involved in the “Read to Rover”
program, but I have also discovered common themes and positivity in all of their narrative accounts.

**Participants’ Positive Evaluations of Their Experiences**

Perhaps the strongest finding from my research was the range of positive responses that the participants expressed in their interviews regarding “Read to Rover.” Every child and adult shared various thoughts, perspectives, and stories about their experiences in the program, all of which revealed numerous positive aspects of “Read to Rover.” These benefits ranged from how the program encourages children’s learning and fosters a sense of comfort and connection, to how it even becomes a part of the school culture. Altogether, the insight gained from the participants of this study is valuable to the way in which we understand and view canine-assisted programs for children.

Among the many positive responses in my interviews with the children and adults, several particularly intriguing findings are worth emphasizing and relating to past research. For instance, many of the child and adult participants commented on the positive impacts that “Read to Rover” has had on the development of children’s reading skills and comfort and confidence with reading. This is crucial because the children and adults both recognized the benefit that participating in the program has on their/children’s reading abilities. This finding is consistent with the research by Smith and Meehan (2010), who conducted a quantitative and qualitative investigation of the effects of a canine-assisted reading program for children. My results are supported by this research since Smith and Meehan (2010) found that reading fluency and accuracy scores improved among the children who participated in the program and that in interviews with children and parents, positive changes were reported regarding children’s skills
and comfort with reading aloud. However, Smith and Meehan (2010) did not provide a thorough analysis of their qualitative findings, and only presented several brief excerpts from the interviews. Thus, in addition to their research supporting my study, my research also helps further Smith and Meehan’s (2010) study, since I offer a more extensive analysis of children’s and adults’ perspectives on a canine-assisted reading program.

In addition to my study revealing how children and adults feel that “Read to Rover” supports the development of reading skills and children’s comfort with reading, several of the adults also emphasized how the program helps children gain the desire to read. This is an exciting finding because it shows that through their participation in the program, children, who may be reluctant readers for a multitude of reasons, may begin to form positive associations with reading when in the presence of their canine reading partner. By forming positive associations with reading, they may be more likely to visit the library and choose a book to read for pleasure, which several of the adults noted in their interviews. For children who may not enjoy reading, this program provides them with an alternative approach to the activity. In my interviews with the children, it became clear that each child enjoys the program and holds positive feelings about some aspect of reading and about the visits with the canine partner.

All of the children also shared pleasurable feelings that they have about reading to the dog, specifically. For instance, the children reported feeling happy and more relaxed when reading to their canine partner. One child even compared her feelings about reading to a human and reading to a “Read to Rover” dog, and expressed that she feels nervous when reading to a person, but feels calm when reading to the dog. This finding is consistent with the existing literature on canine-assisted therapy for children, specifically with the research conducted by Beetz et al. (2011), who found that child participants had significantly lower stress levels when
interacting with a friendly dog than with either a person or a toy dog during a stressful situation. Beetz et al. (2011) also revealed that the more the children stroked the dog, the less pronounced was their stress reaction. Interestingly one of the children described how petting the dog during the “Read to Rover” sessions helps her feel more calm when reading, and several of the adult participants also described this calming effect of the tactile reinforcement. The benefit of relating my study to the Beetz et al. (2011) research is twofold: while the finding from my research offers experiential evidence in support of the previous literature, the Beetz et al. (2011) study may offer insight into what could potentially be occurring physiologically with respect to oxytocin in the children during their “Read to Rover” sessions.

Another significant finding from my research was that of the positive connections that can form between a child and a “Read to Rover” dog. All of the adults commented on the positive ways in which children respond to the dogs and how some of children open up to the dogs in ways that they may not with people. For instance, there was one story about a student who told her canine reading partner that she has Asperger’s, and another about how a student who loved music but struggled with reading and had never written lyrics to a song before, wrote a song with music and words for the dog that she read to. Further, all of the children also revealed various ways in which that have formed positive associations and connections with the dogs in “Read to Rover.” From all of the participants’ personal accounts, it is clear that there are unique and powerful bonds that can develop between children and their canine reading partners during the “Read to Rover” sessions. One adult even mentioned that children react much differently to animals, and that some children can connect more easily with animals than with people.
This positive connection between children and dogs that was reported in my interviews is consistent with the biophilia hypothesis, which claims that children are born with a natural affinity towards and attraction to non-human creatures (Melson, 2005). Research that has investigated pets’ roles in children’s lives has also shown that children readily include their pets as members of the family and consider their pets to be close friends (Melson, 2005; Tipper, 2011). Other studies have also documented the countless advantages of children’s bonds with animals (Blue, 1986). While in the current study, the “Read to Rover” dogs are not the children’s pets, there still appears to be a strength in their connections that may be reminiscent of the findings from previous studies. For instance, one child participant did not have any pets at home, but expressed that because of “Read to Rover” she now knows what it feels like to have a dog. Furthermore, several of the advantages of child-animal bonds as discussed by Blue (1986), including fostering love, comfort, learning, and confidence, all shine through in my analysis of the children’s and adults’ interviews as being benefits of the relationships that can form between children and dogs.

**Dogs as Beneficial Members of the School Community**

With respect to one of my original questions regarding whether dogs can be considered beneficial members of school communities, I believe this study reveals that when executed carefully, a canine-assisted program for children can be beneficial for the school as a whole, specifically because of the presence of the dog. Thus, from my interviews and observations, I believe I can conclude that certified pediatric therapy dogs are valuable members of the school community where I conducted my research. All of the child and adult participants in my study shared positive aspects of having therapy dogs visit their school, and even in my observations at
the school this was clear. For instance, as students, staff, and faculty passed by the “Read to Rover” sessions, which take place in a school corridor, many of them looked at the dog and smiled, and some of the children even kindly greeted the dog and asked to pet her. In this school setting, the dog was not a negative distraction for the students. Rather, I observed the dog’s presence as an aspect of the community that was familiar to everyone, an element that everyone appeared to enjoy. Many of the students, staff, and faculty knew the dog by name, and for children who participated in “Read to Rover” in previous years, they are able to maintain a connection with their canine-reading partner by still seeing the dog in their school. Together, my observations support many of the findings from my interviews with the children and adults, specifically in relation to recognizing that not only are the “Read to Rover” dogs beneficial for the children in the program, but they are also a positive element of the entire school community.

In their interviews, many of the participants described the dogs’ presence in the school and their impact on the community both spontaneously and in response to my questions on this topic. The adults expressed the success of “Read to Rover” and described how the children, teachers, and schools as a whole, embrace this unique program. The children also shared positive remarks about having “Read to Rover” dogs come to their school, such as feeling happy and privileged and that it is a good opportunity. In a sense, the dogs become a “part of the school culture,” something which was specifically stated by one of the teachers in this study. This finding is also supported by the existing literature on canine-assisted programs in schools. In research by Walters Esteves and Stokes (2008), the authors described how dogs can be beneficial members of school communities by enhancing children’s social, emotional, and academic experiences at school in classrooms and in school counselors’ offices. My study provides evidence to further support this concept, in that through my observations and interviews, I have
uncovered various ways in which “Read to Rover” has a positive effect both on the individual child and on the school community as a whole.

**Future Directions for Canine-Assisted Therapy Programs for Children**

Throughout my interviews with the children and adults, a series of questions regarding the future of canine-assisted programs for children in elementary schools were triggered in my own mind, and I realized that many questions remain unanswered and open for debate. For instance, because of how positive all of the responses were from the participants, I became curious about whether or not the implementation of canine-assisted programs can or should be more widely encouraged and if certified therapy dogs should have a larger role in schools.

Melissa Kielbasa, founder and director of the “K-9’s for Kids Pediatric Therapy Unit,” provided me with generous insight on these topics, first in relation to the development of “K-9’s for Kids” (within which “Read to Rover” exists) and then in relation to the development of canine-assisted programs in schools and dogs’ potential roles in schools. She emphasized how “K-9’s for Kids” is a program that is very carefully organized and executed to maintain its effectiveness and safety for everyone involved. Since “K-9’s for Kids” and specifically “Read to Rover” are small programs, every handler and dog involved is personally known by Melissa, who is also familiar with all of the sites visited by the teams. In this way, there is a level of closeness that allows the program to be run smoothly and effectively. In one of her interviews, Melissa expressed:

I think sometimes the bigger you get, yeah your name gets out there and maybe you get more famous, but that's not what we're in it for here. I'm not in it for the publicity. We're in it for the kids. So I want to make sure that we stay small enough that we can really stay as successful as we are.
Thus, it is important for Melissa and the “K-9’s for Kids” team to remain true to their original mission, and by maintaining a small, strong, and specially selected group of dog-handler teams, they are able to effectively serve children in their community.

Melissa also discussed the development of canine-assisted programs in schools and dogs’ potential roles in schools. This is important to consider because I believe that when research, such as the findings from my study, displays such positive support for something, it can seem desirable to implement it or make use of it to the greatest extent possible. Thus, I wondered if dogs can and should be part of school communities on a larger scale. According to Melissa, not only are there legality and liability concerns that go along with having therapy dogs enter a space where they are no longer working on a “volunteer” basis, but the dogs’ well-being must also be considered. For the “Read to Rover” dogs, they typically enter a school for only an hour every other week, and are working on a volunteer basis with their handler, and thus they and their handler are insured as a team. However, for teachers or counselors who might consider bringing their dog to work with them at a school, there could potentially be liability issues, as that dog would not be working on a volunteer basis, since their handler is being paid at work. Further, that dog would be working for extensive periods of time. According to Melissa:

Having a dog interact with strangers is a very stressful thing for dogs…sometimes when people are thinking about bringing [a dog] into work, they're not necessarily really thinking about it from the animal's perspective. Is your animal really going to enjoy being there with you?

Thus, when considering the inclusion of a dog in a school community or even just in a school program, it is critical to consider both the possible liability concerns and the dog’s well-being. While my research clearly displays numerous positive elements of a canine-assisted program for children in an elementary school, it is important for programs such as this to be planned and executed thoughtfully, especially as canine-assisted programs become more popular as we move
into the future. Thus, my study reveals that a canine-assisted reading program can be incredibly effective and beneficial for children and schools when done carefully.

**Implications and Reflection of Methods**

By presenting the analysis of my interviews with the children and adults who participated in this study, a new perspective has been gained on canine-assisted programs for children. Specifically, this research expands our existing knowledge on canine-assisted reading programs for children in elementary school settings, and we now have insight into children’s and adults’ unique perspectives on the topic. The findings from this study are valuable to the development of the field both in theory and in practice. In the growing field of canine-assisted therapy for children, the existing literature on the subject is still almost entirely based on quantitative measures, with little emphasis on the importance of listening to children’s experiences with these programs. While this research is undeniably important to the development of the field, a critical piece has not been thoroughly explored. When children’s voices are overlooked in research that concerns them, I believe we are missing out on valuable information that can only be gained through engaging with children directly and taking the time to consider and appreciate their voices and perspectives. Thus, my research begins to delve into this.

Through interviewing children about their experiences in “Read to Rover,” I have started to uncover the ways in which children think and feel about their participation in a canine-assisted program. Of course, not every child who is involved in a program such as this will reflect on their experience in the same way that the children I interviewed did, but this individuality is one of the significant elements of this type of research. Even within the small group of children that I interviewed, each child brought forth something unique, as they all hold their own stories and are
affected by the program differently. From this, there is much that can be learned that has not yet been thoroughly investigated in the field of canine-assisted therapy for children. For instance, we now have support to show the positive perspectives that children have on their involvement in the program. It is through the words that the children expressed in their interviews, along with the words that the adults shared in their interviews, that I have been able to uncover the many positive and beneficial elements of “Read to Rover.” Although the services offered by this program does not directly impact the adult participants from my study, the adults’ evaluations of their experiences also have much to offer to the field of canine-assisted therapy, as their unique experiences provide perspectives that can only be gained from talking with them directly. The commonalities between the children’s and adults’ interviews are telling, and reveal the strength in listening to both children’s and adults’ voices.

This research is hopefully only the beginning of much more qualitative research that explores children’s and adults’ experiences with canine-assisted programs for young people. Through my interviews and analysis, I gave voice to children’s voices and revealed that we have much to learn from their perspectives and experiences. However, my study is not without limitations. First and foremost, my research was a small-scale project, consisting of four child participants, five adult participants, and one school location. Furthermore, of these participants, all of the adult participants (aside from Melissa) were personally recommended to me by Melissa, which could potentially create a positive bias in my findings. Regarding the child participants, four of the seven children who were invited to participate returned consent forms in order to participate. Thus, the perspectives of the other three children who are involved with “Read to Rover” at this school are unknown. Additionally, with more time to complete this research, I would have conducted longer interviews and follow-up interviews with the child
participants in order to gain even more insight from them. For these reasons, follow-up studies should be conducted to investigate the generalizability and consistency of my findings. For instance, more extensive qualitative studies should be completed that not only interview more students and adults, but that also look at different schools and even different programs within the same study. By conducting larger studies that include participants from various schools and canine-assisted programs, we would gain an understanding of how these programs affect children in multiple contexts, which would even further the development of the field. Lastly, I believe that follow-up studies should be conducted that investigate both qualitative and quantitative measures, in order to investigate the consistency between what is quantitatively measured and what is narratively reported in interviews.

Despite these limitations, my research explores an aspect of canine-assisted therapy for children that has not yet been thoroughly investigated. By providing an in-depth analysis of children’s and adults’ perspectives on a canine-assisted reading program, this study expands our current knowledge of the field. Through listening to their voices and by sharing their perspectives, it has become clear that “Read to Rover” is a positive and beneficial program for elementary school children and for their school community as a whole.

**Closing Thoughts**

Throughout this study I have emphasized the importance of including children’s and adults’ perspectives in research on canine-assisted programs for children, as there is much to be gained from listening to their voices. For this reason, I believe it is appropriate to conclude this paper with excerpts from my interviews with several of the participants, as this will serve as a reminder of the power of giving voice to children’s and adults’ voices. I believe these quotations
stand strong on their own and powerfully display the value of this research and of the “Read to Rover” canine-assisted reading program. On the following page, three final quotations are presented from my interviews with Melissa (director/handler), Olivia (Grade 3), and Betty (handler).
Closing Excerpts from the Children’s and Adults’ Interviews:

“It can be really tough to get [children] to pick up the book and to get them to actually want to read, because there's just no desire. But they know they're coming to see the dog. They know that their dog friend is coming to read with them, so they're actually going to the library and looking for books and pulling books from the teacher's selection, which teachers will say to me they couldn't get them to do that before, that they just didn't want to. So now we're finding that this is just opening up that desire to read.” –Melissa (director/handler)

“He's snuggled up next to her and she was just a little bit nervous and everything else. And she, I don't even think she realized she did it, but her hand came over and just started rubbing him. She was up by his head and she just kind of just took an ear, and you know how you just stroke their ears? It was eerie [emphasis in voice quality] to see, as she started doing it, it was almost with each stroke the inflexions became quieter, they became smoothed out. She started reading and it sort of hit a rhythm. It was almost like the reading kept a rhythm with her stroking the dog. And I just sat. I almost burst into tears. You know, because this [emphasis in voice quality] is what it's all about.” –Betty (handler)

“I like it because I can actually read to the dog. And like, if someone like... I like to pet him because it makes me more calm, because I wouldn't want to pet a person. It's really fuzzy so it makes me, like, better to read, because I get more calm. Because when I read in front of someone I get a little, like, freaked out, because if I’m doing it wrong or right. So when I have the dog, the dog doesn't talk, so I just feel better reading to it.” –Olivia (Grade 3)
References


