

## **Lived Experiences of Filipino Special Education Teachers in Implementing Animal-Assisted Therapy for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder**

**Noida R. Della-Giustina**

Graduate School of Education, University of Perpetual Help System DALTA, Las Piñas City, Philippines

**ABSTRACT:** This phenomenological study sought to understand the lived experiences of special education teachers in implementing animal-assisted therapy (AAT) as social-emotional support for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). It explored how teachers described and characterized their experiences in integrating AAT into classroom practice, including its influence on instruction, student engagement, and the learning environment. The participants consisted of twelve (12) Filipino international licensed special education teachers under the J-1 Visa Program who were teaching in selected school districts in Arizona, United States. Participants had at least three years of experience implementing AAT with students with ASD and met the inclusion criteria established for the study. Individual in-depth interview was used to gather data from the participants using a standardized interview guide adapted from Shiverdecker (2021). The findings presented in this chapter were derived from the verbatim transcripts of the individual in-depth interviews. The data were analyzed using Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method, which involved repeated reading of the participants' narratives, identification of significant statements and meaning units, formulation of meanings, and synthesis of recurring patterns across the participants' experiences. Epoche was observed throughout the analytical process to minimize the influence of the researcher's prior assumptions and allow the participants' accounts to remain central to the interpretation. The participants' lived experiences were characterized through three (3) themes. Theme 1, Animal-Assisted Therapy as Relational and Holistic Support for Social-Emotional Development, reflected experiences related to emotional safety and regulation, social communication and peer connection, motivation and meaningful engagement, and purposeful instructional integration. Theme 2, Adaptive, Collaborative, and Safety-Conscious Implementation of Animal-Assisted Therapy, captured individualized and gradual participation, resource and professional preparation constraints, student safety and animal welfare, family and multidisciplinary collaboration, and sustainability through reflection and institutional support. Theme 3, Transformative Professional Meaning and Teacher Growth, reflected student-centered instruction, compassionate and relationship-centered classroom management, and the development of professional identity and renewed purpose.

**KEYWORDS:** animal-assisted therapy; Autism Spectrum Disorder; special education teachers; lived experiences; descriptive phenomenological design

---

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) has gained international recognition as an effective intervention for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Countries such as the United States, Canada, and United Kingdom have integrated AAT into educational and therapeutic programs to improve communication, social interaction, emotional regulation, and behavioral outcomes among learners with autism (Demiralay & Keser, 2022).

In the Philippines, the use of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is gradually gaining attention as an emerging intervention in special education and therapeutic settings. Filipino special education therapists, and parents recognize the potential of AAT in improving communication, social interaction, emotional regulation, and behavioral development among students with autism. Although local research on AAT remains limited, schools and therapy centers have started exploring its benefits as a complementary approach to traditional interventions. In the context of inclusive education, AAT offers a learner-centered and holistic strategy that supports the emotional and developmental needs of students with ASD (Chan et al., 2025).

In educational contexts, special education teachers play a critical role in introducing and adjusting animal-assisted therapy as part of tailored teaching methodologies. Their tasks include organizing learning experiences that combine animal encounters, managing safety and hygiene, interacting with therapists or handlers, and aligning these activities with students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The effectiveness of animal-assisted therapy in schools largely rests on the teacher's comprehension, creativity, and comfort in conducting these treatments. However, while the potential benefits of animal-assisted therapy are generally recognized, teachers' opinions and lived experiences in implementing this technique remain poorly studied (Aabed, 2024).

# **Lived Experiences of Filipino Special Education Teachers in Implementing Animal-Assisted Therapy for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder**

Although research on animal-assisted therapy and autism has developed over the past decade, most studies have focused on its influence on students rather than on the teachers who facilitate the intervention. Quantitative research has studied the therapeutic benefits for students—such as increases in social skills, reduction of stress, and enhanced classroom participation—but few studies have dug into the lived experiences of special education teachers who implement these programs. Their views could indicate crucial aspects that determine the success or limitations of animal-assisted therapy, including logistical problems, institutional support, ethical considerations, and the emotional impact on teachers themselves. Furthermore, existing material often analyzes animal-assisted therapy in clinical or therapeutic situations rather than in educational settings. There is scant awareness of how special education teachers integrate animal-assisted therapy into curricular goals, how they cooperate with experts such as occupational therapists or animal handlers, and how these experiences impact their teaching philosophy and practice. Exploring teachers' lived experiences can provide significant perspectives on the real-world application of animal-assisted therapy in schools and emphasize the supports needed for effective implementation.

Moreover, existing studies highlight the benefits of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), yet they often fail to explain how and why these outcomes occur within real classroom settings. Most research focuses on measurable student improvements without examining the processes, interactions, and contextual factors that shape these results. There is limited understanding of how teachers implement AAT, adapt strategies to individual needs, or integrate it with curricular goals. Moreover, the underlying mechanisms—such as how animal interaction influences emotional regulation, motivation, and social behavior—remain insufficiently explored. Without these insights, the effectiveness, sustainability, and practical application of AAT in educational contexts remain unclear.

Therefore, a significant research gap exists in understanding how special education teachers experience, interpret, and make meaning of using animal-assisted therapy in teaching students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Exploring their lived experiences can provide valuable insights into implementation realities, professional identity formation, emotional labor, institutional constraints, and opportunities for innovation. Addressing this gap will contribute to the development of teacher preparation programs, policy guidelines, and evidence-based frameworks for integrating animal-assisted interventions within inclusive educational settings.

This phenomenological study sought to understand the lived experiences of special education teachers in implementing animal-assisted therapy (AAT) as social-emotional support for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). It explored how teachers described and characterized their experiences in integrating AAT into classroom practice, including its influence on instruction, student engagement, and the learning environment. The study also examined the insights and implications that may be drawn from these experiences for special education practice. By synthesizing the recurring patterns and meanings reflected in the participants' narratives, the study further aimed to develop a practical framework for the implementation of AAT in supporting the social-emotional development of students with ASD.

## **2. METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This study was qualitative in nature and made use of phenomenological approach to describe and explore the lived experiences of the participants. A descriptive phenomenological design was used to get a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of special education teachers in implementing the animal-assisted therapy as an instructional support for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

### **Research Locale and Context**

The research locale of this study focused on Filipino international special education teachers under J1 visa program in the State of Arizona, United States. Arizona served as a significant site due to its diverse student population and ongoing demand for qualified teachers, particularly in specialized areas such as special education. Many school districts in the state recruited Filipino teachers to address staffing shortages and enhance instructional support. These teachers work in various public schools across urban and suburban settings, providing a relevant environment to examine their professional experiences. Limiting the locale to Arizona allowed for a more contextualized understanding of their roles within a specific educational system.

The study used purposive sampling method in choosing participants for the study. The following were the criteria to be set and used by the researcher to fit for the study: (a) Filipino international licensed special education teachers in the United States under J1 visa program; (b) male or female, (c) ages ranged from twenty five to sixty-five years; (d) has 3 or more years experiences in implementing the animal-assisted therapy as an instructional support for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD); (e) licensed and certified AAT provider from Arizona Department of Education and respective school districts.

After conducting an initial evaluation among special education teachers in the locale of the study using the criteria, the researcher chose 12 special education teachers who agreed to be part of the study.

# Lived Experiences of Filipino Special Education Teachers in Implementing Animal-Assisted Therapy for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Once identified, the selected participants were formally invited to participate in the study and were provided with detailed information regarding the purpose, procedures, and ethical considerations of the research. Informed consent was secured prior to data collection, ensuring voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. All participants were interviewed individually. Background information about each participant were summarized using pseudonyms and codes.

Individual in-depth interview was used to gather data from the participants using a standardized interview guide adapted from Shiverdecker (2021). The interview guide was divided into two parts. The first part was about the demographic profile of the participants, the second part was about the participants' lived experiences in implementing the animal-assisted therapy as an instructional support for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

For the validation of the interview guide as the instrument of the study, the interview guide was submitted to experts for review, scheme and validation including 2 Senior Education Program Specialists (SEPS) in Special Education. The experts were consulted by e-mail. A cover letter explaining the premise of the research study, a description of the participants' criteria, and a brief explanation about the purpose of the study were emailed to each expert. The interview questions were attached to the cover letter in email format as well. Following the format of validation, each expert checked either the questions are accepted, rejected, need for revision and their remarks. All revisions suggested by the experts were tallied and followed. After that, the researcher asked the experts to sign the validation report as a proof of following the process of validation of research instrument.

The study observed established ethical principles throughout the data-gathering and analysis processes. Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher ensured that the interview guide was reviewed for sensitivity and appropriateness, particularly in relation to participants' age, sex, health, social background, and cultural context.

Informed consent was secured from all participants before data collection. The participants were clearly informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, the possible benefits of participation, and their right to decline or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Permission to conduct the study was likewise obtained from the concerned school administrators and school districts.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. Personally identifiable information was not disclosed, and participant codes were used in the presentation and discussion of the findings. The researcher exercised discretion in handling demographic information and made every effort to protect the identities of the participants during data gathering, analysis, report writing, and eventual dissemination of the study.

All individual in-depth interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. The interviews were recorded using an HD Audio Recorder application and saved in MP3 format. During transcription, the researcher used a headset to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the recorded conversations.

The researcher personally listened to each audio recording and manually transcribed the interviews verbatim using Microsoft Word. After completing the initial transcription, the researcher listened to the corresponding recording again while reviewing the written transcript. This process was repeated as necessary to verify the accuracy and completeness of the participants' responses and to correct any words or statements that had been inaccurately captured during the initial transcription.

The findings presented in this chapter were derived from the verbatim transcripts of the individual in-depth interviews. The data were analyzed using Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method, which involved repeated reading of the participants' narratives, identification of significant statements and meaning units, formulation of meanings, and synthesis of recurring patterns across the participants' experiences. Epoche was observed throughout the analytical process to minimize the influence of the researcher's prior assumptions and allow the participants' accounts to remain central to the interpretation.

## 3. RESULTS

This section presents the findings derived from the participants' lived experiences and organized according to the revised Statement of the Problem. The findings were consolidated into major themes based on recurring meanings and patterns identified across the participants' narratives. Each theme is supported by representative participant statements and contextual descriptions that illustrate their experiences, instructional practices, responses to implementation challenges, and professional reflections. Together, these findings provide the basis for the insights and implications of the study and the development of the proposed practical framework for animal-assisted therapy implementation.

**Matrix 1. Alignment of the Statement of the Problem, Consolidated Themes, and Subcodes**

| Statement of the Problem                                                                                                     | Theme                                                                                                  | Subcodes / Analytical Categories                                                                                                                                                              |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| SOP 1. How do special education teachers describe their lived experiences in implementing animal-assisted therapy as social- | Experiencing Animal-Assisted Therapy as a Relational, Adaptive, and Professionally Meaningful Practice | Emotional safety and calming; emotional regulation; social communication; peer interaction; motivation and classroom engagement; purposeful instructional use; individualization according to |

## Lived Experiences of Filipino Special Education Teachers in Implementing Animal-Assisted Therapy for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

| Statement of the Problem                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Theme                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Subcodes / Analytical Categories                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| emotional support for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | student needs; implementation difficulties; safety and animal welfare; collaboration; reflection and professional growth                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| SOP 2. How are does the lived experiences of special education teachers in implementing animal-assisted therapy for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder characterized?                                                       | Theme 1. Animal-Assisted Therapy as Relational and Holistic Support for Social-Emotional Development<br><br>Theme 2. Adaptive, Collaborative, and Safety-Conscious Implementation of Animal-Assisted Therapy<br><br>Theme 3. Transformative Professional Meaning and Teacher Growth | Emotional Safety and Regulation; Social Communication and Peer Connection; Motivation and Meaningful Engagement; Purposeful Instructional Integration<br><br>Individualized and Gradual Participation; Resource and Professional Preparation Constraints; Student Safety, Ethical Practice, and Animal Welfare; Family and Multidisciplinary Collaboration; Sustainability through Reflection and Institutional Support<br><br>Student-Centered and Meaningful Instruction; Compassionate and Relationship-Centered Classroom Management; Professional Identity and Renewed Purpose |
| SOP 3. What insights and implications for special education practice may be drawn from the lived experiences of the participants?                                                                                               | Animal-Assisted Therapy as an Individualized, Relational, and Ethically Grounded Special Education Practice                                                                                                                                                                         | Emotional readiness as a condition for learning; recognition of individual student differences; alignment of AAT with IEP and social-emotional goals; relationship-centered teaching; safety and risk assessment; protection of therapy-animal welfare; family and multidisciplinary involvement; continuing professional preparation; reflective and evidence-informed practice; institutional support                                                                                                                                                                             |
| SOP 4. Based on the findings of the study, what practical framework may be proposed for the implementation of animal-assisted therapy in supporting the social-emotional development of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder? | Proposed Practical Framework for Safe, Individualized, Collaborative, and Sustainable AAT Implementation                                                                                                                                                                            | Student Readiness and Individualization; Purposeful Instructional Integration; Safety and Ethical Safeguards; Therapy-Animal Welfare and Handler Support; Family and Multidisciplinary Collaboration; Reflection, Evaluation, and Sustainability                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

### Theme 1. Animal-Assisted Therapy as Relational and Holistic Support for Social-Emotional Development

The first consolidated theme characterizes the participants' lived experiences of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) as a relational and holistic form of support for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Across their narratives, participants described the therapy animal as contributing to an environment in which students could experience emotional safety, regulate difficult emotions, communicate more naturally, establish relationships, participate more willingly in learning activities, and engage in instruction that was increasingly responsive to their individual needs. These accounts were consolidated into four interrelated subthemes: (1) Emotional Safety and Regulation; (2) Social Communication and Relationships; (3) Motivation and Classroom Engagement; and (4) Purposeful and Individualized Teaching Practice.

*P2 "The students appeared more relaxed every time the therapy dog entered the classroom. It felt like a security blanket."*

### Theme 2. Adaptive, Collaborative, and Safety-Conscious Implementation of Animal-Assisted Therapy

The second consolidated theme characterizes the participants' lived experiences of implementing animal-assisted therapy (AAT) as a process that required continuing adaptation, professional preparation, collaboration, and attention to the safety and welfare of both students and therapy animals. Although participants recognized the social-emotional value of AAT, their narratives showed that effective implementation did not occur under uniform or ideal conditions. Teachers had to respond to differences in students' communication abilities, sensory preferences, emotional readiness, and behavior while simultaneously managing limitations related

## Lived Experiences of Filipino Special Education Teachers in Implementing Animal-Assisted Therapy for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

to resources, professional preparation, scheduling, school support, and program continuity. These experiences were consolidated into five interrelated subthemes: (1) Individualized and Gradual Participation; (2) Resource and Professional Preparation Constraints; (3) Student Safety, Ethical Practice, and Animal Welfare; (4) Family and Multidisciplinary Collaboration; and (5) Sustainability through Reflection and Institutional Support.

*P7 "Individualization was important in every implementation. There was no one way that worked for all students, so I continuously modified activities, expectations and levels of support according to each learner's skills, interests, communication abilities and social-emotional needs. Flexibility was one of the most crucial features of successful deployment."*

### Theme 3. Transformative Professional Meaning and Teacher Growth

The third consolidated theme characterizes the deeper professional meaning that participants attached to their experiences with animal-assisted therapy (AAT). Beyond the perceived effects on students and the practical demands of implementation, teachers described changes in how they understood instruction, classroom management, student behavior, relationships, and their own professional roles. The original manuscript similarly identified AAT as a transformative influence on teaching practice and professional identity, noting changes in instructional strategies, classroom management, teacher-student relationships, and commitment to holistic education. For the analysis, these experiences were consolidated into three subthemes: (1) Student-Centered and Meaningful Instruction; (2) Compassionate and Relationship-Centered Classroom Management; and (3) Professional Identity and Renewed Purpose.

*P12 "Animal-assisted therapy became more than an intervention, it became a reminder that hope, empathy, inclusion and real human connection are at the heart of special education."*

## 4. DISCUSSION

A second insight is that AAT cannot be appropriately implemented through a uniform procedure for all students with ASD. Theme 2 showed that participants continually adjusted interaction according to communication abilities, sensory processing, emotional regulation, behavior, interests, and willingness to approach the therapy animal. Some students participated directly, while others first observed or engaged through alternative forms of participation.

The implication is that participation should remain individualized, flexible, and voluntary. A student should not be considered unsuccessful simply because direct physical interaction with the therapy animal does not occur. Observation, communication about the animal, helping peers, following visual routines, or participating from a distance may constitute meaningful engagement depending on the student's needs.

A third insight is that the educational value of AAT depends on why and how the therapy animal is incorporated into instruction. Participants repeatedly distinguished meaningful implementation from simply having an animal present in the classroom. Theme 1 showed that teachers purposefully connected animal-assisted activities with communication, emotional regulation, social interaction, motivation, and academic learning. Theme 3 further demonstrated that participants became increasingly intentional about integrating social-emotional and academic goals.

This suggests that the therapy animal should serve as an instructional facilitator rather than become the lesson itself. Activities should begin with clearly defined educational or social-emotional objectives and identify how interaction with the therapy animal supports those objectives.

This finding closely aligns with the dissertation's RRL. Anderson and Olson (2022) and Fine et al. (2023) are cited as showing that teachers who use AAT may adopt more flexible, student-centered, and experiential approaches in which animals facilitate learning and behavioral support. The manuscript also identifies a need to connect animal-assisted activities to individualized educational objectives rather than treating them as generalized enrichment.

Another major insight is that the participants' experiences consistently redirected attention toward relationships as a foundation for instruction and classroom management. Theme 3 demonstrated that teachers increasingly interpreted student behavior through emotional needs, communication attempts, and relational context rather than primarily as behavior requiring correction.

Participants described becoming more patient, encouraging, proactive, and attentive to students' emotional states. Positive relationships were consequently perceived not as an additional benefit but as a condition supporting cooperation, emotional security, and engagement. The manuscript explicitly synthesizes this finding by describing participants' classroom management as increasingly empathetic, preventive, and relationship-oriented.

Theme 2 demonstrates that AAT was not experienced as an intervention that one teacher could effectively implement in isolation. Parents, therapists, administrators, school psychologists, other educators, and certified therapy-animal handlers contributed to planning, monitoring, safety, and continuity.

The implication is that AAT should be organized through a multidisciplinary support structure. Teachers contribute knowledge of classroom instruction and individual learners; therapists may contribute expertise related to communication, sensory processing,

## **Lived Experiences of Filipino Special Education Teachers in Implementing Animal-Assisted Therapy for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder**

and behavior; families provide information about student responses outside school; administrators provide scheduling and institutional resources; and certified handlers contribute expertise concerning animal behavior and welfare.

The final insight concerns the teachers themselves. Theme 3 showed that participants described changes in patience, flexibility, compassion, strengths-based thinking, reflection, and professional purpose. Some teachers described renewed passion for special education, while others reconsidered what constituted meaningful student success.

The implication is that it may have significance not only as a student-focused intervention but also as a context for teacher reflection and professional meaning-making. The experience appeared to prompt participants to reconsider the balance between academic performance and emotional growth, disability and student strengths, behavior correction and understanding, and instructional completion and meaningful development.

This interpretation is directly supported by O'Haire (2017), who associated animal-assisted therapy (AAT) with greater teacher satisfaction, stronger emotional connections with students, and a renewed sense of professional purpose. The literature further suggests that observing meaningful progress among students who may not respond as effectively to conventional approaches can strengthen teachers' commitment to inclusive and innovative practices.

### **CONCLUSION**

1. The lived experience of special education teachers implementing animal-assisted therapy is multifaceted and relational, not simply procedural. It can be experienced as meaningful when the interaction between the student, teacher, therapy animal and learning environment create conditions that support emotional security, communication, engagement and meaningful participation. Therefore, its therapeutic value lies not only in the presence of the therapy animal but also in the way that the teacher intentionally composes and responds to the experience.
2. The participants' lived experiences are best characterized as relational and holistic, adaptive and safety conscious, and professionally transformative. The findings suggest that the perceived benefits of AAT cannot be disentangled from the conditions of implementation. Individual differences among students, professional preparation, collaboration, ethical safeguards, animal welfare, institutional resources, and reflective teaching all influence the implementation and experience of AAT. At the same time, the process can influence the instructional philosophies, classroom management approaches, and professional role perceptions of teachers. The participants' experiences indicate that effective special education practice requires attention to emotional readiness, individualization, relationships, ethics, collaboration, and reflection alongside academic instruction. Thus, it should therefore be considered supplementary educational support rather than an independent or substitute intervention. The teacher remains the instructional leader responsible for aligning animal-assisted activities with legitimate educational goals, monitoring student responses, modifying instruction, and safeguarding the well-being of both students and therapy animals. This position is also reflected in the manuscript's practice guidance that the therapy animal supports rather than replaces effective teaching.
3. A practical and sustainable program requires a systemic framework rather than reliance on individual teacher initiative. Appropriate implementation should begin with student and institutional readiness, proceed through purposeful instructional integration and ethical safeguards, involve qualified handlers and multidisciplinary collaboration, and continue through documentation, reflection, evaluation, and institutional support. The proposed framework therefore provides an organized approach for translating the participants' lived experiences into special education practice.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. For the Lived Experience of AAT Implementation. Special education teachers who use or intend to use AAT should approach it as a structured educational support rather than as an incidental animal interaction. Teachers should first assess students' emotional, sensory, behavioral, and communication readiness; introduce therapy-animal interaction gradually; maintain predictable routines; and provide alternative forms of participation for students who are not comfortable with direct contact. Participation should remain voluntary and responsive to the changing needs of individual learners.
2. For the Characterization and Conditions of Effective Implementation. Schools implementing AAT should establish clear conditions for individualization, professional preparation, safety, animal welfare, and collaboration. Teachers should receive appropriate professional development in AAT principles, ASD-specific needs, instructional integration, animal behavior, hygiene, safety, risk management, and ethical practice. Schools should work only with appropriately prepared therapy animals and qualified handlers and should develop protocols concerning supervision, emergency procedures, animal rest, veterinary care, and signs of animal stress. The manuscript similarly emphasizes that safety should protect both students and animals and that participation should remain respectful and voluntary.
3. For Special Education Policy and Practice. Educational leaders should develop institutional policies that clearly define the educational purpose, approval process, safety procedures, parent consent requirements, professional responsibilities, documentation, and evaluation of AAT programs. Animal-assisted activities should be connected, where appropriate, to students' IEP goals, SEL competencies, communication targets, behavioral objectives, or academic outcomes. Families, therapists, school

## Lived Experiences of Filipino Special Education Teachers in Implementing Animal-Assisted Therapy for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

psychologists, administrators, and therapy-animal handlers should be included in planning and evaluation to ensure coordinated and appropriate implementation. The study's existing practical guidance likewise emphasizes alignment with IEP and SEL goals and multidisciplinary participation.

4. For Sustainability and Further Development of the Practical Framework. The proposed framework should be piloted on a manageable scale and regularly evaluated for feasibility, safety, acceptability and perceived educational contribution before widespread implementation in schools. Administrators must provide resources, scheduling support, continuing professional development, documentation systems and opportunities for collaborative reflection. In the future, researchers could test the framework we propose in other educational contexts and with different groups of students to see how applicable it is and what parts need to be changed. Further investigations might consider the perspectives of students, families, therapy-animal handlers, and multidisciplinary professionals to complement the teacher-centered findings of this phenomenological inquiry.

## REFERENCES

- 1) Aabed, R. (2024). *The integration of certified therapy dog teams into special education: Insights of volunteer handlers* [Senior honors project, Eastern Michigan University].
- 2) Anderson, K. L., & Olson, M. R. (2022). Revisiting animal-assisted interventions in classrooms: Implications for inclusive education. *Contemporary Special Education Research*, 18(2), 45–60.
- 3) O'Haire M. (2017). Research on animal-assisted intervention and autism spectrum disorder, 2012-2015. *Applied developmental science*, 21(3), 200–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2016.1243988>
- 4) Chan, K. J. C., Lapitan, M. C. M., & Cordero, C. P. (2025). Goal attainment scaling and quality of life of autistic students receiving speech and language therapy in a higher educational institution in the Philippines. *Acta Medica Philippina*, 59(3), 7–20. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/40151225/>
- 5) Demiralay, Ş., & Keser, I. (2022). The effect of pet therapy on the stress and social anxiety levels of disabled students: A randomized controlled trial. *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice*, 48, 101574.
- 6) Fine, A. H., Mueller, M. K., Ng, Z. Y., Griffin, T. C., & Tedeschi, P. (Eds.). (2024). *Handbook on animal-assisted therapy: Foundations and guidelines for animal-assisted interventions* (6th ed.). Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/C2023-0-00565-9>
- 7) Shiverdecker, K. H. (2021). *Animal Assisted Interventions in Schools: A Qualitative Case Study of How Students with Emotional or Behavioral Disabilities Respond to the Use of Therapy Dogs*. Northcentral University.



There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non-Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.