“It makes me feel like I have a place in this world.”

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Exploring Children’s Experiences of School Dogs Supporting their Wellbeing.

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Abstract

Research shows that there has been a concerning rise in reported mental health difficulties for children in the last decade (NHS Digital, 2022; Rider et al., 2021). Previous research has highlighted the potential benefits that animals can have on mental health and wellbeing in different settings e.g. care homes (Freedman et al., 2021), hospitals (Correale et al., 2022), universities (Lalonde et al., 2020), and schools (Beetz, 2013). With schools having an important role in supporting children's mental health and wellbeing (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015), it is worthwhile exploring the use of school dogs to support children's wellbeing. Previous research exploring children's views of school dogs supporting their wellbeing has,

a) focused specifically upon children reading to dogs, and/or

b) offers descriptive (surface-level) insight.

Therefore, there is a gap in the literature as it does not offer an in-depth exploration of children's views and experiences of a range of interactions with school dogs to support their wellbeing. This research study hopes to address this gap to offer a unique contribution to educational psychology research in this area.

This research aimed to explore how children make sense of their views and experiences of school dogs supporting their wellbeing. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with seven children aged from 9 years (Year 4) to 12 years (Year 7) who were from four different mainstream primary and secondary schools in the United Kingdom. Interviews were then analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Two group experiential themes were interpreted for the first research question – what are children's perceptions of *how* school dogs affect their wellbeing? These were 'feeling good' and 'functioning well.' Five group experiential themes were interpreted for the second research question – what are children's perceptions of *why* school dogs affect their wellbeing? These were 'emotional attachment,' 'sense of belonging,' 'characteristics of school dogs,' 'nature of interactions with school dogs,' and 'changes in thoughts.' These themes are explored in relation to previous psychological theory and research. Limitations of the research are considered, before suggesting implications for practice.

Acknowledgements

I'd firstly like to thank the children who participated in this study who shared their valuable experiences of school dogs so that others can learn from them.

I would like to offer personal thanks to my family, my fellow TEP cohort, and my research tutor who have offered encouragement and practical support throughout the research process.

And finally, although sadly no longer with us, thank you to the true inspiration behind this research – my family's chocolate Labrador, Rolo.

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Key Terminology

According to The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989), a 'child' is anyone under the age of eighteen years old. Therefore, this is who the terms 'child' or 'children' refer to throughout the present study. Where the present study refers to anyone aged 18-25, the term 'young adult' will be used (Higley, 2019).

Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) is a term in the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015) which is used to describe a wide range of social and emotional difficulties that may present in behaviour that seems challenging or withdrawn. Further terminology will be explained and defined within the relevant sections.

1.2 Focus and Rationale of the Present Research

Research has documented a concerning rise in reported SEMH difficulties in children in recent years (NHS Digital, 2022). Rates of a *"probable mental health disorder"* for children aged 7-16 years rose from 1 in 9 in 2017 to 1 in 6 in 2020 (NHS Digital, 2022, p. 2). These rates have remained consistently high from 2022-2023 (NHS Digital, 2023).

These rates are important to consider as mental health difficulties have been associated with different negative outcomes such as being more likely to smoke (Minichino et al., 2013), a higher probability of being excluded from school (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013), and low life satisfaction (Lombardo et al., 2018). Current legislation emphasises the key role schools need to have in supporting children's SEMH, and Educational Psychologists' role in supporting schools by contributing to the graduated response (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015).

Research has indicated the potential therapeutic benefits of children interacting with animals such as improved self-esteem (Purewal et al., 2017), more positive attitudes towards school (Beetz, 2013), and more positive peer interactions (Sorin et al., 2015). The present study seeks to uniquely explore children's views and experiences of school dogs supporting their wellbeing in primary and secondary schools. It is hoped that this will provide insight for

education professionals into how and why this experience may support children's wellbeing so interventions of this nature can be developed that are more attuned to their needs.

1.3 Personal and Professional Motivations for the Present Research

I am currently a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP), studying at the University of Nottingham, and I am on a placement with an educational psychology service (EPS) in a local authority (LA) within The Midlands. My interest in the presence and utility of dogs in schools stems from my own positive experience of owning a dog. Also, whilst visiting schools as a TEP, I met several 'school dogs,' with whom the children interacted. I was intrigued by this and completed a systematic literature review (SLR) as a previous assignment during year one of the course which explored the evidence-base of school dogs supporting children's wellbeing. This piece of work highlighted a paucity of high-quality research in this area. This is also in-line with discussions that I have had with Educational Psychologists (EPs) – for example, one EP mentioned that they recently had a tribunal where a parent asked for their child to have access to a dog in school, but they could not formally recommend this due to a limited evidence-base. These factors combined have inspired me to explore this further.

1.4 Structure of Thesis

Chapter 1: Introduction.

Chapter 2: Literature Review – This section aims to establish what is already known about children's views and experiences of school dogs supporting their wellbeing. It will consist of two parts: 1) a narrative literature review presenting a broad overview of wellbeing, interventions involving animals as well as the research on this and 2) a systematic literature review to answer a more focused question to guide the rationale and research questions for the present study.

Chapter 3: Methodology – This section outlines the rationale for using IPA along with a detailed description of how the study was carried out.

Chapter 4: Findings – This section presents the IPA findings.

Chapter 5: Discussion – this section will discuss the findings of the present research in relation to existing literature and considers limitations of the study as well as implications for practice and future research.

1.5 List of Acronyms

Acronym	Full Term
AAA	Animal-Assisted Activity
AAI	Animal-Assisted Intervention
AAT	Animal-Assisted Therapy
CASP	Critical Appraisal Skills Programme
DAI	Dog-Assisted Intervention
DAT	Dog-Assisted Therapy
EP	Educational Psychologist
EPS	Educational Psychology Service
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
LA	Local Authority
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
RCT	Randomised-Control Trial
RTD	Reading To Dogs
SEMH	Social, Emotional, and Mental Health
SENCo	Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SLR	Systematic Literature Review
TA	Thematic Analysis
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Summary of the Literature Review

This literature review consists of a narrative literature review followed by a SLR. The narrative review begins by exploring definitions and theories of wellbeing. It then examines the current context and implications for children's wellbeing along with schools' and EPs' role in supporting this. The importance of gaining child voice is also outlined. The potential links between humans interacting with animals and wellbeing are then presented, including research around pet ownership, followed by theory and research around animal-assisted intervention (AAI) and their links with wellbeing. The evidence for this within different contexts and with different populations is reviewed. Consideration is given to a theoretical framework for AAI and research supporting this. The SLR takes a more specific look into what literature indicates about children's experiences and views of dog-assisted interventions (DAI) in relation to their wellbeing in school settings.

2.1.1 Rationale for Narrative Literature Review

A narrative literature review was undertaken due to its ability to give a comprehensive overview of a topic (Collins & Fauser, 2005). A wide scope of the existing literature was required in order to guide a specific question to be explored in the SLR.

2.2: Wellbeing

2.2.1: *Definitions of Wellbeing*

'Wellbeing' is acknowledged by others as a challenging concept to define (Bache & Scott, 2017; Dodge et al., 2012). It can refer to both psychological and physical health (Clarke & Platt, 2023). The present study focuses upon psychological wellbeing and so this is what is meant by 'wellbeing' henceforth. Different definitions of psychological wellbeing will be considered, and one will be decided upon to use throughout the present study. Different wellbeing theories and models will then be considered.

Wright and Cropanzano (2004) provide a rather general and simplistic definition of wellbeing and suggest that 'happiness' and 'psychological wellbeing' are interchangeable terms, where they define this as:

"the relative presence of positive emotion and the relative absence of negative emotions" (p. 341).

Taking this definition further, Huppert and So (2011) examined criteria required for diagnoses of anxiety and depression and were guided by positive psychology to define the opposite of each symptom. From this, they presented the following aspects as fundamental for wellbeing:

"Competence, emotional stability, engagement, meaning, optimism, positive emotion, positive relationships, resilience, self-esteem, and vitality" (p. 837).

These aspects have helped to conceptualise wellbeing as two related but distinct experiences: hedonia (feeling good), and eudaimonia (functioning well) (Huppert & So, 2011). Some researchers take a hedonic approach to understanding wellbeing in that they just look at the presence of positive emotions and absence of negative emotions – this appears in-line with Wright and Cropanzano's (2004) definition. Whereas researchers aligned with a eudaimonic approach to wellbeing would argue that purely focusing on positive affect is too simplistic and fails to give insight into what underpins the experience of wellbeing (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

It has been suggested that hedonia is directly impacted by eudaimonia (Jia et al., 2022). Whereas others argue that there is a bi-directional and complementary relationship between the two experiences, where overall wellbeing is higher when both hedonia and eudaimonia are present (Huta & Ryan, 2010). Some further definitions of wellbeing appear to reflect both these 'feeling' and 'functioning' components. For example, The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2020, p. 3) define wellbeing as:

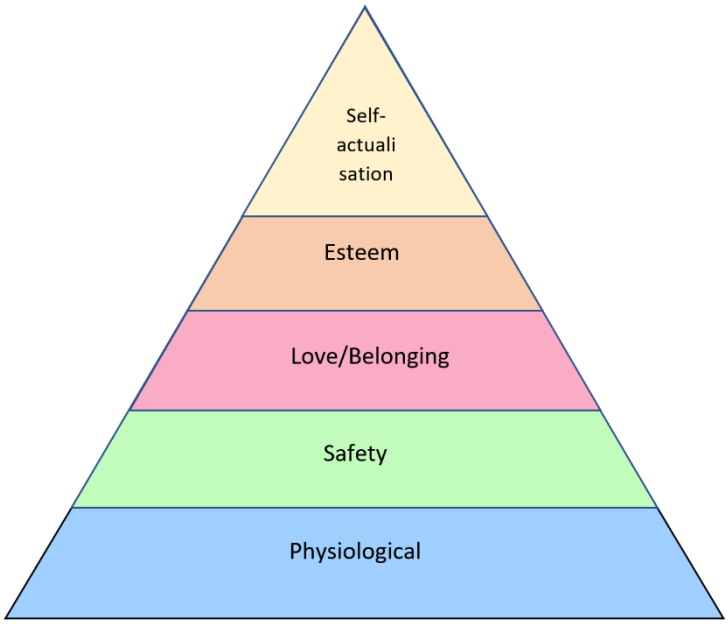
"…happiness, confidence and not feeling depressed, resilience to cope with difficulties, ability to have good relationships with others, think clearly, participate in decision making, and have optimism, a sense of control and self-efficacy."

This conceptualisation of wellbeing is supported by Clarke and Platt (2023), whose research suggested that children understand their wellbeing to be made up of both of these components. Therefore, the present research acknowledges the importance of both hedonia and eudaimonia and conceptualises 'wellbeing' incorporating both.

2.2.2 *Theories and Models of Wellbeing*

Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs is a longstanding theory of human motivation and wellbeing. This theory describes 'self-actualisation' as an individual's realisation of their full potential and their needs that are required to be met to reach this (see Figure 1 below). This theory appears in-line with both a hedonic and eudaimonic view of wellbeing in that there is a combination of 'feeling good' (e.g. esteem, love/belonging) and 'doing well' (e.g. self-actualisation).

Figure 1: *Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs*

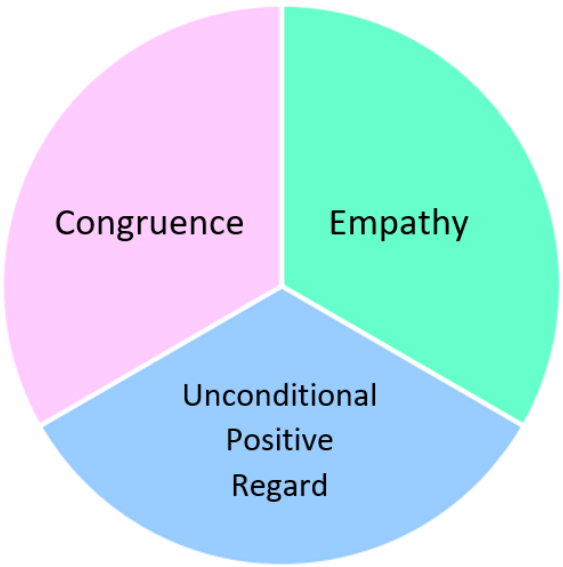


It is important to note how Maslow's (1943) theory has been widely criticised. Firstly, it has been criticised for not originally being based upon empirical research (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976). Secondly, the order and therefore implied importance of the needs in the hierarchy has been argued to not be universal for all cultures (Hofstede, 1984) and ages (Tay & Diener, 2011). More recently however, research has concluded that the theory and the characteristics of self-actualisation remain relevant and applicable to the present day (Kaufman, 2023).

Rogers (1989) is a key humanistic theorist in relation to counselling psychology who draws upon Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs to suggest how a therapist may encourage self-actualisation. He outlines that there are three 'core conditions' that a therapist needs to

show for a client to be able to self-actualise. These are unconditional positive regard, empathy, and congruence (Figure 2 below). This is known as person-centred therapy.

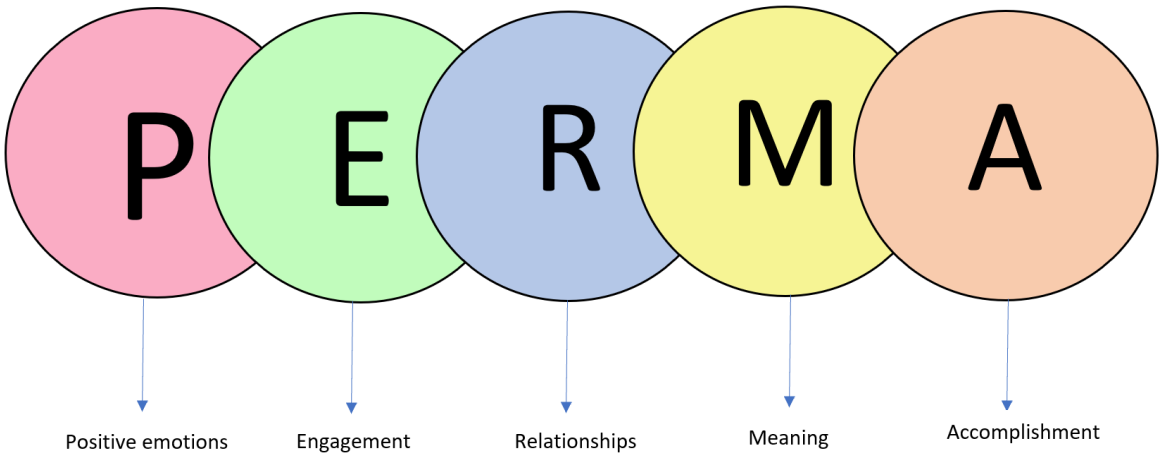
Figure 2: *Rogers' (1989) Core Conditions in Person-Centred Therapy*



There is research evidence to support Rogers' (1989) theory where individuals who had experienced positive therapeutic outcomes rated their therapist as high in these core conditions (Bozarth et al., 2002; Elliott et al., 2011, Klein et al., 2001). However, critics of Rogers' (1989) theory have highlighted that there is ambiguity within the research literature over definitions of the core conditions and have therefore questioned the validity of the evidence-base (Irving & Dickson, 2004).

Another model of wellbeing that is aligned with both a hedonic and eudaimonic view, is Seligman's (2011) PERMA model (Figure 3 below). This model is grounded in positive psychology and proposes that there are five measurable elements that make up wellbeing including positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment.

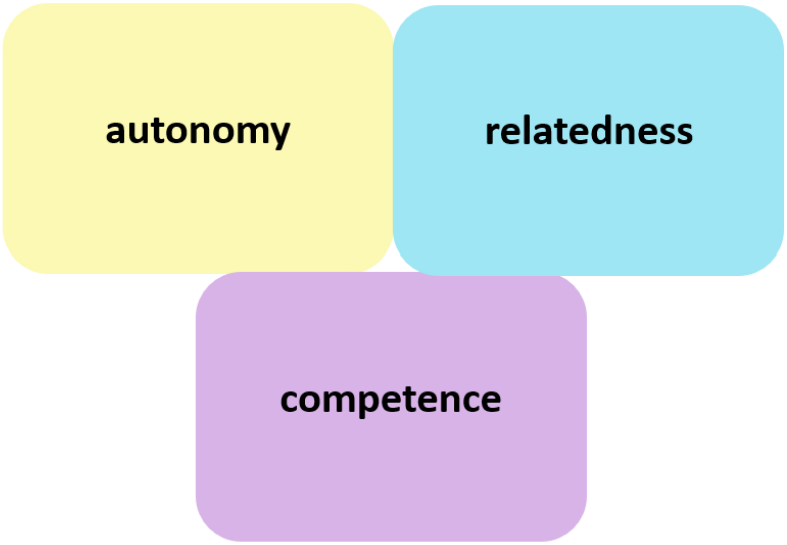
Figure 3: *The PERMA Model of Wellbeing (Seligman, 2011)*



Turner et al. (2023) suggest that PERMA is applicable to children where each component contributed to a positive impact on wellbeing for them. However, critics have argued that PERMA may be culturally biased, and that the wellbeing of different cultures may be made up of different factors such as religion, health, and security in Malaysia (Khaw & Kern, 2014).

Another theory that can be considered when understanding wellbeing is Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-determination theory. This theory posits that there are three psychological needs that need to be met to lead to a sense of intrinsic motivation which links with one's sense of wellbeing. These three needs are autonomy, relatedness, and competence (see Figure 4 below). Ryan and Deci argued that the degree to which any of these three needs are supported, leads to an increased sense of wellbeing. Critics of this theory have argued that it may not be applicable to all cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 2003).

Figure 4: The Three Psychological Needs in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000)



Overall, all four of these wellbeing models support the conceptualisation of both hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing. There is some overlap between how these models explain wellbeing. For example, they all seem to emphasise the importance of the environment with wellbeing. However, each of these models offer something unique. For example, Maslow's (1943) concept of self-actualisation appears to be a helpful way of conceptualising the 'growth' aspect of eudaimonic wellbeing. Meanwhile, Rogers' (1989) core conditions model offers an interesting way of considering how others can facilitate self-actualisation for an individual. Seligman's (2011) PERMA model takes a more experiential stance which was viewed favourably by the present researcher due to the nature of the present study. 'Autonomy' is a psychological need in Ryan and Deci's (2000) model which does not appear in the other three models. Therefore, all four of these models will be considered when conceptualising wellbeing for the present study.

2.2.3 *Implications of Children's Wellbeing and The Current Context*

It is clear in the literature that wellbeing can have a significant impact upon children's lives in many respects. There is evidence of a bi-directional relationship between children's wellbeing and their academic performance, where higher wellbeing links to higher academic performance and vice versa (Bale et al., 2020; Clarke, 2020). Research has also shown that lower wellbeing is associated with negative health and social outcomes (World Health Organisation, 2022). These include higher school exclusion rates (Bowman-Perrott et al.,

2013), a higher likelihood to experience substance abuse (Minichino et al., 2013), and lower employability (Maccagnan et al., 2019).

As highlighted in the introduction section, there has been a concerning increase in prevalence of reported SEMH needs in children in recent years (NHS Digital, 2022; 2023). Other research indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to the decrease in children's wellbeing (Rider et al., 2021), specifically documenting an increase in anxiety and depressive symptoms (Cui & Hong, 2021). Furthermore, statistics from the Department for Education (2024) show that persistent absence (defined as missing more than 10% of school) in UK primary schools increased from 11.2% in 2018 to 20.6% in 2023, which may be explained by increased mental health needs.

In the United Kingdom (UK), the increased demand on SEMH support services has meant that demand is far exceeding supply (Health and Social Care Committee, 2021). Therefore, there is a clear need for a strong evidence-base around SEMH intervention and support so that we know what may work, as well as how and why for insight on how to implement interventions that are attuned to children's needs.

2.2.4 S*chools' Role in Supporting Children's Wellbeing*

Schools have a key role in supporting children's mental health and wellbeing needs as reflected in policy and legislation. For example, the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015) highlights the need for schools to have clear processes to support children with their wellbeing and sets out the graduated response of 'assess-plan-do-review.' Also, the mental health green paper (Department of Health & Social Care and Department for Education, 2018) made it a requirement for all schools to have a 'mental health lead.'

Research has indicated that supportive and trusting relationships between school staff and children can mitigate risks of negative outcomes (Driscoll & Pianta, 2010). Linked to this, attachment research has shown that when schools adopt a relational approach (i.e. focus upon relationships and understanding what behaviour is communicating) to supporting children's behaviour, it is more effective than behavioural approach (i.e. rewards and consequences for behaviour) and has been linked with positive outcomes such as improved wellbeing and reduced exclusion rates (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010;

Riley, 2010). Therefore, schools have a clear role in developing this relational approach within the school ethos to support children.

2.2.5 *Educational Psychologists' Role in Supporting Children's Wellbeing*

It is highlighted in the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015) how EPs contribute to the graduated response when supporting children's SEMH and wellbeing needs. Curran et al. (2003) suggest that the EP role can be considered as working at three different levels: individual, organisational, and systems level. Individual level work where EPs may support children's wellbeing may include carrying out assessments of individual children's needs and 'advice giving' on how to meet their needs through intervention (Ashton & Roberts, 2006). Linked with this, Zafeiriou and Gulliford (2020) highlight how EPs have expertise in consultation processes and knowledge of child development to support this well. Furthermore, Gulliford (2018) highlights the importance of EPs having a good understanding of the evidence-base around interventions in terms of 'what works' as well as the processes of change (the 'how' and 'why') to maximise the chances of interventions being successful.

Organisational level work where EPs may support children's wellbeing may include working with schools on developing policies. Zafeiriou and Gulliford (2020) highlight how EPs' knowledge of organisational change positions EPs to support this well. As already highlighted, a relational approach within a school has been linked to positive outcomes, and so supporting schools with developing a relational policy may form part of their role.

2.3 Child Voice

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) emphasised the importance of children expressing their views and for these to be considered around things that happen to them. This had a significant impact on subsequent legislation, making it a requirement for the voice of the child to be represented in decisions that happen around them (Department for Education, 2014).

Children's views and experiences often offer a unique account differing from adults' perceptions (Ravenette, 1977) and so child voice is a key perspective to explore in terms of developing the evidence-base of an intervention. Clark and Statham (2005) suggest that children are experts of their own lives and listening to their views helps to understand how

they see the world. Gaining children's voices is becoming increasingly recognised as playing an important role in understanding what wellbeing means to them and in developing approaches to support their wellbeing (Coombes et al., 2013; Soutter, 2011).

2.4 Application of Wellbeing Theories to Human-Animal Interactions

There is a documented link between human-animal interactions and human wellbeing including interactions with horses (Mattila-Rautiaine, 2023), dogs (Freedman et al., 2021), and dolphins (Yerbury & Boyd, 2019). Research exploring this link explores pet ownership (e.g. Allen et al., 2002) as well as the therapeutic use of animals in different settings (e.g. Yakimicki et al., 2019). This research will be considered in more detail in the next section. Before this, it seems pertinent to firstly consider how theories of wellbeing presented earlier may be applied to human-animal interactions.

Firstly, Seligman's (2011) PERMA model has been applied to humans interacting with dolphins. Yerbury and Boyd (2019) found strong parallels between their themes answering how interactions with dolphins affect human wellbeing. Their themes included: Connectedness, Relationships, and Reciprocity; Emotion and Aliveness; Meaning and Making Sense; Accomplishment and Intention; and Harmony and Engagement. All five of these themes clearly link with the five elements of the PERMA model (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment). This therefore suggests that the PERMA model can be successfully applied and have relevance to human-animal interactions.

Furthermore, Seligman's (2011) PERMA model has also been successfully applied in the context of a systematic literature review that explored animal interactions and the wellbeing of autistic children (Hege, 2019). The findings for seventeen out of the eighteen studies reviewed were argued to fit at least one element of the PERMA model, with the most common theme being related to relationships. This therefore provide further support for Seligman's (2011) PERMA model successfully being applied to human-animal interactions to support understanding of this experience.

Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) has also been applied to human-animal interactions. Kanat-Maymon et al. (2015) concluded that pet owners' perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness support from their pets significantly predicted higher wellbeing.

This therefore suggests that self-determination theory can also be successfully applied to human-animal interactions and the relationship with wellbeing.

Rogers' (1989) core conditions of person-centred therapy have been explored in relation to animal interactions; Jenkins et al. (2014) asked middle school students (age 11-14) to rate a dog used therapeutically in terms of its characteristics, and students perceived the dog to show all three of Rogers' (1989) core conditions: empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard. This therefore shows that Rogers (1989) core conditions can be successfully applied to human-animal interactions.

All four aforementioned models of wellbeing (Maslow, 1943; Rogers, 1989; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Seligman, 2011) will be considered and discussed in the present study to help make sense of the findings.

2.5 Pet Ownership and the Possible Link with Wellbeing

There is a wealth of research documenting the positive impact of owning a pet upon wellbeing (Allen et al., 2002; Freedman et al., 2021; Gadomski et al., 2022; Irani et al., 2006; Oliver-Hall et al., 2021; Purewal et al., 2017; Trigg, 2022). Research with an adult population will be considered briefly first, followed by research with a child population.

2.5.1 *Research Around the Influence of Pet Ownership on Wellbeing for Adults*

Freedman et al. (2021) conducted some research using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore adults' experiences of having personal pets in care homes. They found a positive impact on wellbeing, with key themes including sense of self, responsibility, motivation and desire to live, and feeling content. Also documenting a positive impact on wellbeing, was Trigg's (2022) research, where pet ownership was predictive of improved mental health in cancer patients. However, Forbes et al. (2017) found that dog owners are more likely to engage in light physical exercise and that this has a positive link with wellbeing and so this raises the question of whether this was directly linked with the dog or whether the exercise was confounding this.

2.5.2 *Research Around the Influence of Pet Ownership on Wellbeing for Children*

Research also suggests a positive impact of having a pet on children's wellbeing. Purewal et al. (2017) conducted a systematic review and found a range of developmental

benefits for children. For example, there were emotional benefits such as improved self-esteem and reduced loneliness, educational benefits including improved flexible thinking skills when problem-solving, and there were social benefits such as improved social skills. However, they did conclude that the impact of owning a pet upon childhood anxiety and depression levels were inconclusive. More recently, Gadomski et al. (2022) found that exposure to a pet cat or dog during childhood was associated with lower incidence of mental health diagnoses in adolescence. These authors note however, that this study took place in a rural area that was judged by them to have a shortage of mental health professionals and therefore may have confounded diagnosis incidence. Purewal et al. (2017) highlight how more longitudinal research and more studies that control for confounding variables are needed to strengthen the evidence for the association between pet ownership and children's wellbeing.

2.6 Interventions with Animals: Animal-Assisted Intervention (AAI), Dog-Assisted Intervention (DAI), Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT), and Therapy Dogs

2.6.1 *Background of Interventions with Animals*

The potential benefits for humans of interacting with animals is not new knowledge. A pioneer in the field, Levinson (1969) introduced his pet dog to his psychotherapy sessions with children. He noticed a positive impact upon the children he worked with; children who had experienced significant trauma who appeared to not feel able to talk to people were able to talk to the dog which led to improved treatment outcomes. Levinson (1969) concluded that the dog acted as a 'transitional object' meaning it is a symbol of safety and security for the child.

2.6.2 *Terminology and Definitions*

Within the literature, a range of terminology is used to refer to the deliberate use of animals in some way for the purpose of promoting a range of therapeutic gains in humans. This is distinct from pet ownership or the use of service or assistance dogs whose role is to provide a service (e.g. guide dogs), not therapeutic gain (Kruger & Serpell, 2006).

AAI is defined by the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organisation (IAHAO) (2014, p. 5) as a "*goal-oriented and structured intervention that intentionally includes or incorporates animals in health, education and human service… for*

the purpose of therapeutic gains in humans." DAI is defined as an AAI specifically with a dog rather than any animal (Jain et al., 2020).

AAT is defined as *"animal-assisted therapy utilizes the human/animal bond in goal-directed interventions as an integral part of the treatment process. Working animals and their handlers must be screened, trained and meet specific criteria. A credentialed therapist working within the scope of practice of his/her profession, sets therapeutic goals, guides the interaction between patient and animal, measures progress toward meeting therapy goals, and evaluates the process"* (Stuart-Russell, 1997, p. 1). According to these definitions therefore, a key distinction between AAI and AAT is that with AAT, the animal and their handler are specifically trained, but this is not necessarily the case with AAI.

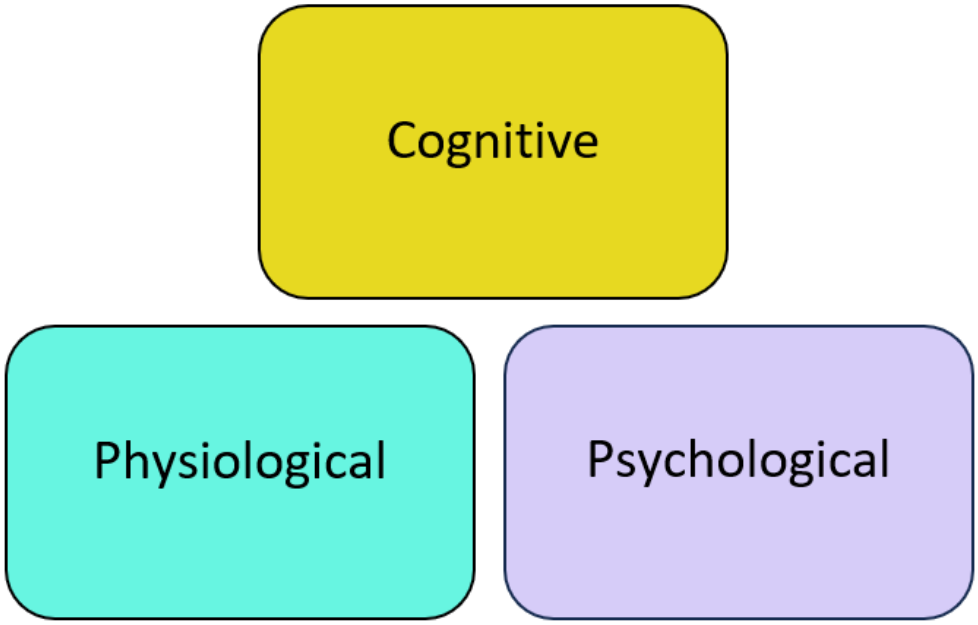
Another term present within the literature, is 'therapy dog.' There does not appear to be a clear definition for this term within the literature, however Glenk (2017) states that usually a therapy dog completes special training and undergoes a temperament test to meet criteria set by certain institutions to gain certification for the dog and their handler. Glenk (2017) suggests that part of these criteria include the ability of the dog to remain calm and consistently follow commands. Therefore, similarly to AAT, 'therapy dog' appears to refer to an AAI with a certified dog and handler.

In-line with Berget (2011), the term AAI will be used henceforth to refer to the use of animals to promote therapeutic gains in humans as the above definitions show that this is a broader colloquial term that encompasses more specific terminology e.g. AAT, therapy dog. For the same reason, when referring to specifically dogs in an AAI, the term DAI will be used. The term 'school dogs' will also be used when referring to the dogs themselves.

2.6.3 *Theoretical Framework for AAI*

Geist (2011) devised a helpful theoretical framework which aims to explain the therapeutic effect of human-animal interaction. The framework draws upon physiological, cognitive, and psychological models (Figure 5 below).

Figure 5: A Visual Representation of Geist's (2011) Theoretical Framework



A Physiological Perspective

Taking a physiological perspective, there is a rich body of evidence of the effects of AAIs. Machova et al. (2019) conducted a small-scale randomised-control trial (RCT) where health-care professionals interacted with a dog during their break. Results showed that participants' salivary cortisol levels (e.g. a physiological indicator of stress) were significantly lower when they interacted with the dog when compared with having a break without interacting with the dog. This effect on cortisol levels was only evident for participants' whose baseline cortisol levels were elevated, therefore suggesting interacting with the dog lowered stress levels for those who were feeling stressed. This was however an entirely female sample with just twenty participants and so this finding cannot be generalised to males. Similarly, Handlin et al. (2018) found that repeated visits from a therapy dog and handler to a care home decreased older adults' heart rates and blood pressure readings. These measures were argued to be indicative of older adults' cardiovascular health and/or stress levels and so these findings suggest the therapy dogs reduced the adults' stress levels. Although this study had a control group where the dogs and their handlers did not visit the participants, there was no comparison condition where just the dog or just the handler visited, and so it must be

questioned whether these findings were confounded at all by the handler and not directly the dog.

A Cognitive Perspective

A cognitive perspective is based on the understanding that there is a constant, reciprocal relationship between an individual's thoughts, feelings, behaviour, and environment (Geist, 2011). In Geist's (2011) framework, a cognitive perspective can explain why children exhibit challenging behaviour. For example, Geist (2011, p. 247) states, *"if a person feels they are 'bad', they will behave 'bad', and society will treat them as a 'bad' person."* It is argued that AAIs may offer children the opportunity to change an individual's thoughts about themselves and therefore change their feelings and behaviour (Siegel, 1999).

A Psychological Perspective

Geist's (2011) framework posits that attachment theory plays a significant role within the psychological perspective. Attachment can be defined as a *"lasting psychological connectedness between human beings"* (Bowlby, 1969, p. 194). Bowlby (1973) developed his theory of attachment to go on to say that there is an innate human drive to feel safe, secure, and emotionally regulated. When a child experiences not having their needs consistently met by a caregiver, this means that the child may not form an attachment that serves as a secure base. Without a secure base, the child may not feel safe to go and explore their environment and this can explain why some children may experience negative affect (Bowlby, 1973). Bowlby (1973) outlines how an individual's early experience of attachment can have significant implications throughout their lives in that we each have an 'Internal Working Model.' This is like a 'blueprint' of expectations and beliefs about the self and others, and this is what our future relationships are based on.

As noted earlier, Levinson (1969) suggested that an animal within AAI may serve as a transitional object. This may link with Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory in that the animal serves as a secure base, adapting the child's internal working model, allowing the child's wellbeing to increase. Supporting this hypothesis, Triebenbacher (1998) conducted some research exploring children's perceptions of their pets which indicated that they showed some attachment-like perceptions of their pets. These included: perceiving them to be important family members, special friends, and providers of affection and emotional support.

Allen et al. (1991) conducted a study exploring children's views on the presence of a dog whilst they completed an arithmetic task. The findings resonate with Triebenbacher's (1998) findings as participants felt that the dog had qualities of a best friend (e.g. listening, empathy, and physical comfort) without any undesirable evaluative traits. They also perceived the dog to be non-judgemental. This links with Friesen's (2010) research who also found that children perceive therapy dogs to be non-judgemental and that they are free from the complexities within human relationships.

2.6.4 *Evidence-base for AAI on Wellbeing*

The literature review will now consider the evidence-base for AAIs and DAIs for different populations within different contexts.

2.6.4.1 *Clinical Settings*

Literature exploring the impact of AAIs upon wellbeing appears to be more prevalent within clinical settings compared with education settings, so this will be considered first. There is a range of research documenting a positive impact of AAIs on wellbeing for adults in clinical settings (Coakley et al., 2021; Maran et al., 2022; Yakimicki et al., 2019). There also appears to be positive findings exploring AAIs with children who are in hospital including reduced state anxiety (Correale et al., 2022), improved mood (Ávila-Álvarez et al., 2020), and increased global functioning and improvement in school attendance (Stefanini et al., 2015). Ávila-Álvarez et al.'s (2020) findings should be interpreted with caution however as they did not have a control group and so it is not clear whether findings are a direct result of the AAI or a confounding factor.

2.6.4.2a *Education Settings – Higher Education*

There is a wealth of research documenting a positive impact of DAI on students' wellbeing in higher education (Anderson & Brown, 2021; Grajfoner et al., 2017; Lalonde et al., 2020; Muckle & Lasikiewicz, 2017; Peel et al., 2023; Spruin et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2018). Therefore, this section will focus upon DAI rather than AAI. There appears to be an over-reliance on quantitative methods which often set out to measure a specific aspect of wellbeing. This may therefore provide some useful information in terms of 'outcomes' of DAIs, but this may limit understanding of DAI in terms of 'processes of change' and understanding why there may be a positive outcome.

Anderson and Brown (2021) conducted a RCT in the United States (US) with nursing students aged 20-22 years. They found that interacting with a dog prior to an exam led to reduced state and trait anxiety. Similarly, Spruin et al. (2021) conducted a RCT in the UK with undergraduate psychology students and found that interacting with a therapy dog was as effective at reducing anxiety and improving wellbeing as a mindfulness intervention and was significantly better at improving both dependent variables than the control group.

Another study documenting a different, but positive impact upon wellbeing in higher education students is Muckle and Lasikiewicz's (2017) study. They studied Singaporean and Chinese university students and as well as significant reductions in state anxiety levels and blood pressure readings after interacting with a therapy dog, they also found significantly improved self-esteem scores. This was however a pre-experimental study meaning that there was no control group and non-randomised allocation to conditions. Furthermore, due to there being an eastern sample, findings may reflect cultural differences within education. Therefore, these findings should be interpreted with caution.

Whilst it is helpful to know that DAIs may improve wellbeing in higher education students, these studies do not explore qualitative details or insight into this association and so this does not extend knowledge and understanding of 'how and why' wellbeing is improved. This therefore does not provide insight into how a DAI may be set up to be most attuned to the students' needs. There is a clear lack of literature exploring university students' views and experiences of DAI. There appears to be just one qualitative study exploring this (Lalonde et al., 2020). This study found that DAI's provided opportunities to be 'in-the-moment,' complemented existing healthy coping skills, and facilitated social connections. This study also found that students expressed feeling loved, comforted, and supported from the DAI. These findings may link with Geist's (2011) theoretical framework for AAIs in that these outcomes could relate to attachment theory.

2.6.4.2b *Education Settings – Schools*

The association between DAI and wellbeing appears to have been researched using more eclectic methodologies within school settings versus higher education settings, however, there appears to be a focus upon children specifically reading to dogs (RTD), rather than exploring a range of activities and interactions between the children and dogs.

Therefore, studies focusing on RTD will be considered firstly, followed by research exploring interactions with dogs more broadly.

i. *Children Reading to Dogs*

Within the literature, there is a clear evidence-base around the impact of children RTD upon their reading ability (see SLR by Hall et al., 2016). Reading ability is beyond the scope of this literature review, but some studies looking into RTD have also found an impact upon children's wellbeing (Barber & Proops, 2019; Bruneau et al., 2023; Henderson et al., 2020; Steel et al., 2021). For example, Steel et al. (2021) explored primary school teachers' perspectives of children RTD, and teachers felt that social and emotional outcomes (e.g. elevating children's mood, emotional wellbeing, and feeling calm) were more significant than the reading outcomes. Teachers also perceived greater benefits on children's reading affect (e.g. motivation and confidence) than reading skills (e.g. fluency).

Another study explored children's perceptions of DAI in relation to their wellbeing (Barber & Proops, 2019). This was a mixed-methods approach where as well as improved reading scores, an increase in confidence and enjoyment of reading was found through questionnaires completed by the children and a coding scheme assessing their reading aloud performance. This could be argued to be in-line with both a hedonic and eudaimonic view of wellbeing as findings related to feelings (e.g. confidence and enjoyment) as well as functioning (e.g. reading performance). In this study, all participants were in Year 7 (aged 11-12) and so these findings should not be generalised to all children. Furthermore, the study used a questionnaire with just three questions to share their views and so did not give participants opportunity to share their views in depth. Along with other studies exploring children's perspectives, the qualitative findings of this study are explored further within the SLR.

ii. *Children Interacting with Dogs More Broadly*

Baird et al. (2022) have recently conducted a SLR exploring the impact of 'therapy dogs' upon the socio-emotional wellbeing of school students aged five to eighteen. This review does not explicitly state how the authors conceptualised 'therapy dog' and so it is challenging to ascertain whether this was excluding DAI's where there was not a certified dog and handler. Nevertheless, this review indicated a range of findings. They concluded that

'therapy dogs' may enhance children and young adults' mood, positive emotions, social skills, confidence, and relationships with teachers.

In Baird et al.'s (2022) review, there were a combination of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research studies included. One of the quantitative studies within this review, is Fujisawa et al. (2016), who conducted some research in Japan involving students aged 9-10. These students completed a survey before and after a single interaction with a dog in school. They found that participants' mood and mental health awareness both improved between pre and post-test. As this study provided just a 'one off' opportunity to interact with the dog, it is unclear whether this impact could have been as a result of novelty rather than as a result of the interaction. Additionally, as they used a survey approach, findings may also be subject to demand characteristics, so should be interpreted with caution.

Another quantitative study within Baird et al's (2022) review was Beetz (2013). This was a quasi-experimental study conducted in Germany where the researcher looked at specific measures of wellbeing for children aged 8-9 years. A dog was present in an elementary school classroom for one day per week for a year and three different questionnaires and scales were given to participants to complete. Findings indicated that participants had a more positive attitude towards school and more positive emotions related to learning when compared with the control group. There was no significant difference on depression scores. Both Fujisawa et al. (2016) and Beetz et al. (2022) used quantitative tools specifically measuring an aspect of wellbeing, not broadly looking at wellbeing. Again, whilst these quantitative studies contribute towards understanding of outcomes of DAIs in schools, they do not provide detail or insight into how or why something has positive outcomes, therefore limiting understanding on how a DAI may be most attuned to children's needs.

A mixed-methods study within Baird et al's (2022) review was Kirnan et al. (2020). This study investigated the impact of a DAI on the behaviour of students in a special school. They collected quantitative data in the form of behaviour logs and checklists, as well as gaining the perspectives of school staff. Findings showed that students exhibited lower 'defiance' and 'aggression,' as well as increased 'confidence,' 'calmness,' and 'focus.' Although not directly measuring students' perceptions of their wellbeing, these behavioural findings may suggest a positive impact on their wellbeing.

The entirely qualitative studies within Baird et al.'s (2022) review were grey literature (doctoral dissertations) conducted outside of the UK (Geist, 2013 & Mitchell, 2019). Grey literature was excluded from the following SLR with the aim of increasing the trustworthiness of the included findings (Nicholas et al., 2015). However, according to Paez (2017), not considering grey literature can miss important findings, therefore the contribution of Geist (2013) will be considered following the SLR. Mitchell (2019) was not available to access.

Baird et al. (2022) also highlight how there is a lack of research exploring the potential mechanisms of DAI and its influence on wellbeing. However, as their SLR was exploring impact on wellbeing, research into mechanisms may not have come up in their search. For example, as mentioned above, Jenkins et al. (2014) concluded that children felt that dogs exhibited Rogers' (1989) core conditions.

2.6.5 *Narrative Literature Review Summary and Conclusion*

In summary, this narrative literature review has highlighted the importance of gaining children's unique views and perspectives on what supports their wellbeing (Coombes et al., 2013). This is of particular importance currently due to a significant rise in reported SEMH needs in children (Cui & Hong, 2021; NHS Digital 2022). The association between wellbeing and interacting with animals, particularly with dogs, is documented within different contexts and populations. This has been presented in the form of pet ownership research, as well as AAI research within clinical settings and educational settings. It appears that a large proportion of the research in education settings is conducted in higher education settings, and that there is an over-reliance upon quantitative methodologies in these settings. A range of methodologies have been utilised within school-based research, including quantitative research suggesting a link with improved mood (Fujisawa et al., 2016; Steel, 2021) and more positive attitudes towards school (Beetz, 2013). The majority of the qualitative studies have focused on RTD and the link with wellbeing (Bruneau et al., 2023; Henderson et al., 2020).

Whilst completing the narrative literature review, it was apparent that there were a small number of qualitative (or mixed methods) studies exploring children's experiences and views of DAI in school settings, which have been presented above. The majority of these studies have collected several different stakeholders' perspectives and drawn their conclusions based on a combination of these, and so it is unclear what the literature indicates

specifically about children's perspectives. These studies, as well as further studies found through the SLR process, will now be explored in more detail to provide further insight into this specific focus and the gap in the literature will be highlighted.

2.7 Systematic Literature Review

2.7.1 *Background and Rationale for SLR*

Historically, SLRs have focused on quantitative inquiries such as intervention effectiveness (Boland et al., 2017). More recently, the importance and value of including qualitative inquiries within SLRs has been highlighted (Hong & Pluye, 2019).

An SLR was undertaken as Collins and Fauser (2005) argue that a SLR is suitable for a specific, narrow focus on a topic. They also argue that an SLR can reduce potential bias in the selection of studies presented as the process should be described in sufficient detail for it to be replicated, meaning that a more trustworthy insight can be given into a specific area.

Within this section, the process of the SLR will be described which will be set out according to Gough's (2007) key methodological steps for conducting an SLR which are:

- Formulate review question and develop protocol,
- Define studies to be considered (inclusion and exclusion criteria),
- Search for studies (search strategy),
- Screen studies (check that meet inclusion criteria),
- Describe studies (systematic map of research),
- Appraise study quality and relevance, and
- Synthesise findings (answering review question).

The findings of the SLR will then inform the rationale and research questions for the present study which are presented subsequently.

2.7.2 *Review Question*

A broad overview of literature surrounding children's wellbeing, and the potential benefits of AAI has been presented in the narrative literature review. This included consideration of Baird et al.'s (2022) recent SLR which explored the impact of 'therapy dogs' on socio-emotional wellbeing of school students. Being mindful not to duplicate this work and considering the importance of gaining child voice in how to improve children's wellbeing

(Coombes et al., 2013), the following review question has been developed as the focus of this SLR:

What does previous research indicate about children's views and experiences of interacting with dogs to support their wellbeing in school settings?

As highlighted towards the end of the narrative literature review, there appears to be a number of studies investigating different perspectives around DAIs in schools, however, these findings appear to not have been synthesised to review specifically what the literature indicates about children's perspectives on this.

2.7.3 *Search Strategy*

i. Database Search

Conducting the narrative literature review allowed the present author the opportunity to analyse the terminology used by studies within the field to consider and guide relevant database search terms. Appendix 1A-C show a systematic series of iterations being employed to yield an appropriate number of papers. Appendix 1C shows the finalised search terms that were used for the SLR.

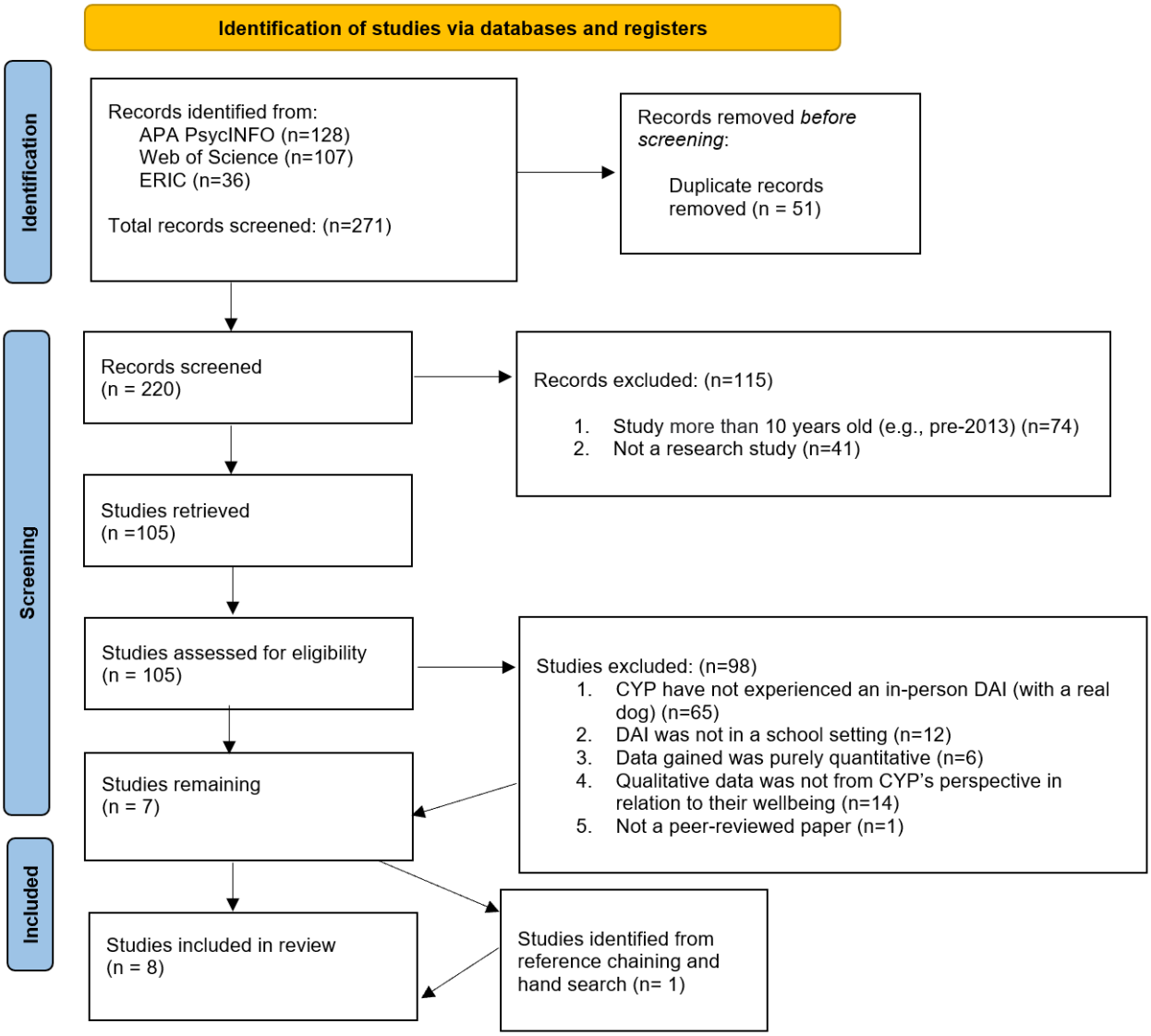
Once search terms and inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 1) had been decided upon, three databases were searched in July 2023 through the University of Nottingham's NUSEARCH facility. These included APA PsycINFO, ERIC, and Web of Science, which were chosen due to their range of journals relevant to education and/or psychology. Several of the search terms were truncated to show a wider variety of studies that were possibly viable (Appendix 1C). The same databases were searched again in February 2024 and there were no new papers that met eligibility criteria.

As can be seen in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) flowchart (Figure 6), the database search yielded a total of 271 papers. These were not filtered in any way until the screening using the eligibility criteria (Table 1). These papers were all exported to EndNote X9, where EndNote's 'remove duplicates' function was used, which resulted in 220 papers.

ii. *Hand-search*

As suggested by Hopewell et al. (2007), a hand-search was conducted to identify relevant studies that may not have been within the databases. Two journals – Educational Psychology in Practice and School Psychology Review were searched with the same search terms as the database search (Appendix 1C). This resulted in no relevant studies. Reference chaining was also carried out as part of the hand search and this identified one additional study that met eligibility criteria.

Figure 6: PRISMA flowchart showing search strategy and screening process



2.7.4 *Eligibility Criteria and Screening*

After duplicates were removed, all 220 studies were screened against the following eligibility criteria (Table 1). The majority of papers were screened at the title or abstract level,

unless criteria could not be determined, in which case the present author screened the whole text. Studies that referred to "animal-assisted," and didn't clearly specify whether this was a dog or differentiate the outcomes specifically in relation to the dog were excluded. By the end of the screening process, there were seven studies for the SLR, as well as one study from the hand search, resulting in eight studies overall. Figure 6 shows the PRISMA flowchart which summarises the search process and the number of yielded studies at each stage.

Table 1: A Table to Show the Eligibility Criteria used to Screen the Search Results Against

Reason Code	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Justification
Publication date	Published between 2013-2023	Published before 2013	To show studies most relevant to the present day
Publication type	Research paper	Not a research paper	The SLR will review research findings
Phenomenon of Interest	Children have experienced an in-person DAI	Children have not experienced an in-person DAI	To consider the impact of DAI as dogs are argued to be the most cost-effective animal for schools to use (Barker et al., 2016)
Context	Children have experienced a DAI in a school (e.g. Reception – Year 13 or equivalent) setting	Children have experienced a DAI in a non-school setting	Schools have a key role in supporting mental health and wellbeing (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015).
Research Design	Qualitative or mixed methods	Quantitative	SLR question is focused on views and experiences
Population	Children's perspective in relation to any aspect of their wellbeing	Not children's perspective in relation to any aspect of their wellbeing	It has been highlighted by Coombes et al. (2013) the importance of gaining children's voice in relation to what supports them with their wellbeing
Research paper type	Peer-reviewed	Not peer-reviewed	Peer-reviewed studies have undergone a level of scrutiny

2.7.5 *Data Extraction - Description of Studies*

All studies were read at least twice and key descriptions and findings of the eight included studies are presented in Appendix 2. Where studies used a mixed-methods design, only the qualitative findings (from the children's perspective) have been extracted.

2.7.6 *Quality Appraisal*

Before synthesising the findings of the included studies, it is important to critically appraise the quality of the studies to add clarity to how much weight the studies' findings should be given in answering the review question (Gough, 2007). Gough's (2007) Weight of Evidence (WoE) Model was chosen to be applied due to its flexible approach to evaluate different study designs. This model is set out according to four dimensions:

Table 2: A Table to Show Gough's (2007) Weight of Evidence Model

WoE Dimension	**Description of Dimension**
A	The quality of the method and design
B	How appropriate the study design is for answering the review question
C	The relevance of the findings in answering the review question
D	A combination of A-C to give an overall assessment of the evidence in answering the review question

The methodological quality (WoE dimension A) of the included studies was appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) for qualitative research (CASP, 2013) (Appendix 3). This checklist was chosen due to its detailed guidance in assessing methodological quality of qualitative studies to add clarity and consistency in the appraisal approach across studies. See Appendix 4 for scores given to each study.

Boland and Cherry (2014) argue that the CASP components hold different weightings relative to one another, and for this reason, a total CASP score was not given to the studies. The process of using the CASP checklist helped me to give WoE A ratings to the studies. For example, three of the studies (Bruneau et al., 2023; Sorin et al., 2015; Zents et al., 2017) did not explicitly state which data analysis methodology was used and so these studies were

automatically rated as 'low' in methodological quality. It was decided to rate Pinto and Foulkes' (2015) study as 'low' in methodological quality too as they did not state an aim for the study and so the value of the findings in meeting the aim cannot be determined. Steel (2022) was rated as 'medium' as although they stated their data analysis methodology, they were not explicit about how they went about thematic analysis and there was no raw data to back up findings. Syrnyk et al. (2022) was also rated as 'medium' as they did not describe the thematic content analysis process and did not discuss potential researcher bias. Barber and Proops (2019) was also rated as 'medium' as they provided direct data but did not describe the steps of analysis in sufficient detail. Lastly, Henderson et al. (2020) was the only study to score 'high' on methodological quality. This decision was made as they provide direct data to back up findings and they explicitly describes the stages they took for thematic analysis. They also mention the steps taken to attenuate researcher bias. WoE A ratings are presented in Table 3.

According to Gough (2007), for qualitative research, there are no set criteria to use to provide WoE B (how appropriate the study design is for answering the review question) and C (the relevance of the findings in answering the review question) judgements. Therefore, the appropriateness and relevance of the eight included studies were analysed and B and C criteria were developed (see Appendix 5) with the aim of comparing the studies against each other, rather than against an absolute standard.

Each study was given a rating of 'high,' 'medium,' or 'low' in dimensions B-C based on subjective judgements of how appropriate and relevant the studies were for this SLR (Table 3). WoE dimension A-C scores were then combined to give an overall subjective rating (WoE D) of the quality of the evidence in answering the review question (Table 3). It is important to note that there is the possibility of bias in these ratings as the researcher provided these judgements alone. The quality appraisal was not used a screening tool due to the limited number of studies available for the SLR.

Table 3: A Table to Show Weight of Evidence Ratings

	Barber & Proops (2019)	**Bruneau et al. (2023)**	**Henderson et al. (2020)**	**Pinto & Foulkes (2015)**	**Sorin et al. (2015)**	**Steel (2022)**	**Syrnyk et al. (2022)**	**Zents et al. (2017)**
A	med	low	high	low	low	med	med	low
B*	high	med	med	high	med	low	high	med
C*	high	low	low	high	med	low	med	high
D	med-high	low-med	med	med	low-med	low-med	med-high	med

*See Appendix 5 for the criteria used to make judgements

To summarise, the quality appraisal has shown that three studies (Bruneau et al., 2023; Sorin et al., 2015 & Steel, 2022) scored 'low-medium' in overall quality, three studies (Henderson et al., 2020; Pinto & Foulkes, 2015 & Zents et al., 2017) scored 'medium,' and two studies (Barber & Proops, 2019 & Syrnyk et al., 2022) scored 'medium-high.' Therefore, the overall quality of the eight included studies is relatively low.

2.7.6.1 *Evaluative Overview of Methodologies Used*

All eight of the included studies appeared to use descriptive methodologies such as thematic analysis (Barber & Proops, 2019; Henderson et al., 2020; Steel, 2022) and thematic content analysis (Syrnyk et al., 2022). Studies frequently did not clearly state which methodology was adopted and the process of this (Bruneau et al., 2023; Pinto & Foulkes, 2015; Sorin et al., 2015; Zents et al., 2017) which is reflected in the relatively low overall quality ratings in section 2.7.6. The data gained in these studies was often very limited in detail (e.g. children sharing single word answers and not being given opportunity to expand upon this). This is important to highlight as these thematic/descriptive methodologies can limit important details about how children make sense of a complex phenomenon such as wellbeing (Mashford-Scott et al., 2012). The findings from the eight studies are synthesised below.

2.7.7 *Synthesis of Findings*

There is no 'gold standard' method of qualitative synthesis (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009). Qualitative synthesis methods fall into two categories: 1) integrative – where data is described, summarised, and aggregated, or 2) interpretive – where data is interpreted to come up with new theory (Flemming & Noyes, 2021).

Noyes et al. (2021) recommend three qualitative evidence synthesis methods – framework synthesis, meta-ethnography, or thematic synthesis. Framework synthesis requires the use of a framework to aggregate the data, however there is the risk that the framework used is inappropriate and this is not clear until synthesis has started (Oliver et al., 2008). This was not deemed appropriate for the present SLR due to the researcher's limited timeline and limited frameworks from the narrative literature review. Meta-ethnography on the other hand, requires thick data in the form of raw data and rich descriptions *(*Noblit & Hare, 1988). As the quality assessment process has shown that the included studies have a mix of thick and thin data and some did not provide examples of raw data, this was not deemed an appropriate synthesis method. Lastly, thematic synthesis has a clear and transparent approach and can be used for a combination of thick and thin data (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Thematic synthesis was chosen for the present SLR due to its transparency and utility with thick and thin data. It is also considered an 'interpretive' synthesis method, whereby findings are not just summarised, but an interpretation is given of the overall data. As far as possible, I followed Thomas and Harden's (2008) three steps to thematic synthesis:

1. line by line coding

2. development of descriptive themes

3. generation of analytical themes

2.7.7a *Thematic Synthesis Steps 1 and 2:*

As highlighted in the quality appraisal section, not all of the included studies provided raw data within their paper. Therefore, 'line by line coding' was not deemed appropriate for all studies. Therefore, for studies where themes were already generated and presented within the study, these themes were added straight to a Microsoft Word document (e.g. Barber & Proops, 2019, Appendix 6). For studies where there were no themes generated (e.g. Bruneau

et al., 2023), or where themes were combining data from children's perspectives as well as others' perspectives (e.g. Steel, 2022), raw data was added to the Word document and I coded the data and arranged this into descriptive themes (Appendix 6). Themes were then amalgamated across all studies to provide a bank of descriptive themes across all the studies. These descriptive themes are shown in Table 4.

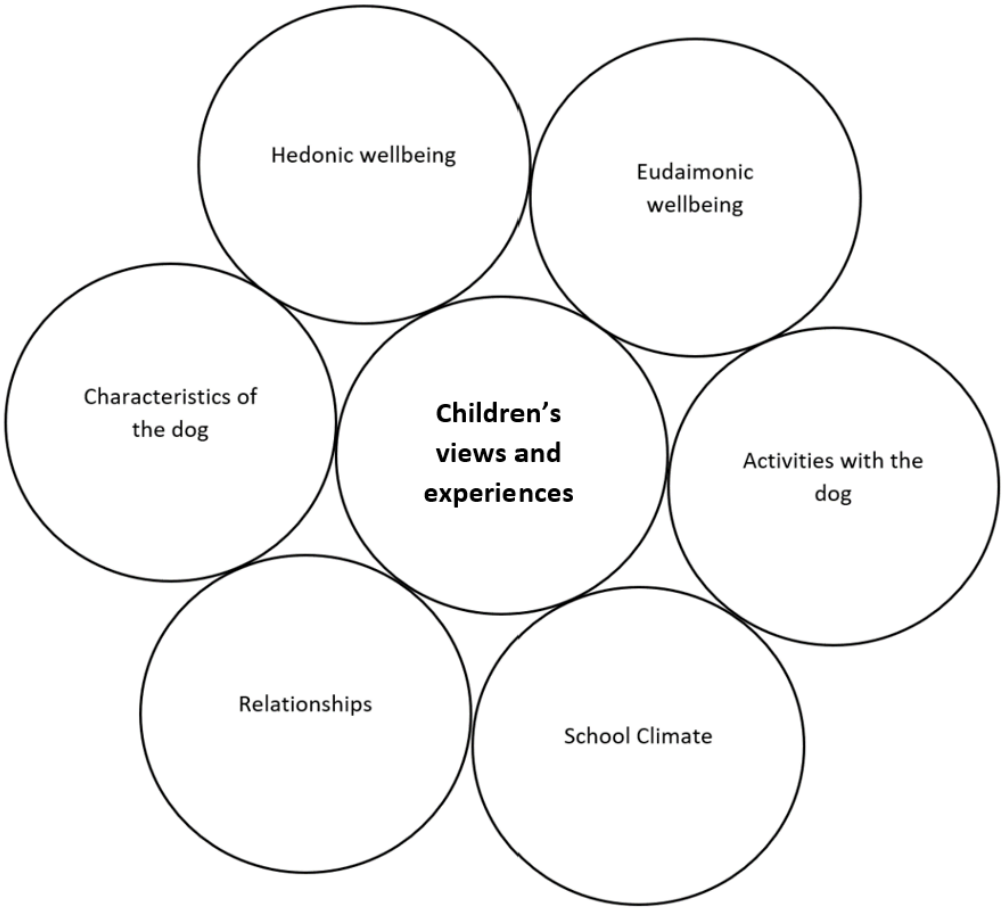
Table 4: A Table to Show the Amalgamated Descriptive Themes from the Included Studies

Descriptive Themes
Emotional benefits
Effect on internal states
Characteristics of the dog
Relationships
Achievement
Engagement and attitude to reading
Confidence as a learner
Enjoyable and interesting experience
Effects on School Climate
Improved concentration
Bonding/belonging
Vocational musings
Activities with the dog

2.7.7b *Thematic Synthesis Step 3*

I then used the descriptive themes (Table 4) and raw data where possible to directly answer the SLR question by generating analytical themes (Thomas & Harden, 2008). See Appendix 7 for how the descriptive themes fit into the analytical themes. Six analytical themes were identified which are presented in Figure 7 and expanded upon below.

Figure 7: Analytical Themes



Theme 1: Activities with the dog

Reading to Dogs

The majority (six out of eight) of the included studies in this review focused solely upon RTD as the DAI being explored (Barber & Proops, 2019; Bruneau et al., 2023; Henderson et al. 2020; Sorin et al., 2015; Steel, 2022; Syrnyk et al., 2022). This included named RTD interventions such as 'Story Dogs' (Henderson et al., 2020) and 'Classroom Canines' (Sorin et al., 2015). The remaining four RTD studies did not appear to follow a named RTD intervention (Barber & Proops, 2019; Bruneau et al., 2023; Steel, 2022; Syrnyk et al., 2022).

Vocational Dog Care Programme

Pinto and Foulkes (2015) was the only study that solely explored a vocational programme form of DAI. This involved the students learning about dogs such as grooming and feeding the dogs.

Interacting with Dogs More Broadly

Zents et al. (2017) was the only study looking at children's interactions with dogs more broadly. They found that students had experienced going for walks, teaching commands, playing with the dog, eating lunch with the dog, caring for the dog, and talking to the dog. Children in some studies focusing on RTD however, did talk about talking to and petting the dog (Bruneau et al., 2023; Steel, 2022).

Theme 2: Hedonic Wellbeing

All eight studies suggested that children felt that DAIs in schools had a positive impact on their hedonic wellbeing (Barber & Proops, 2019; Bruneau et al., 2023; Henderson et al. 2020; Pinto & Foulkes, 2015; Sorin et al., 2015; Steel, 2022; Syrnyk et al., 2022; Zents et al., 2017).

Calming

Four studies found that children perceived a calming influence from the DAI; for example, "calm on the inside" (Barber & Proops, 2019), "helps to keep calm" (Pinto & Foulkes, 2015). Syrnyk et al. (2022) and Zents et al. (2017) also found this.

Happiness

Happiness was another feeling that children experienced in several of the studies. For example, "makes me happy" (Barber & Proops, 2019), "[I feel] happier…when I'm sad, it makes me happy" (Henderson et al., 2020). Syrnyk et al. (2022) and Bruneau et al. (2023) also found this.

Excitement

Excitement was another feeling that children experienced with the DAIs. For example, "but I'm still excited to read to [the dog]" (Henderson et al., 2020), "Happy! I felt excited when I knew he was coming" (Steel, 2022), and Barber and Proops (2019) also found this.

Fun and Enjoyable'

Four studies found that children viewed the DAI in school as fun and enjoyable. For example, "very fun and enjoyable" (Barber & Proops, 2019), "[the dog] makes me feel like I like reading" (Henderson et al., 2020), 'enjoyed the experience' (Pinto & Foulkes, 2015), and "Reading is more fun when Seth is there. I like to read to him'" (Steel, 2022). This links with Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of wellbeing where 'positive experiences' are thought to contribute towards wellbeing.

Confidence

Several of the studies found that children felt they had increased in confidence as a result of the DAI. This was mainly around confidence with reading. For example, "[the dog's] given me like confidence" (Henderson et al., 2020), "I was struggling. Now I'm used to reading. I'm a better learner." (Sorin et al, 2015). Zents et al. (2017) found that children felt that their confidence had improved generally.

Self-Consciousness

Only one study suggested a possible negative influence on hedonic wellbeing. Two participants in Barber and Proops' (2019) study felt a level of self-consciousness and RTD. For example, "When I first read to [the dog] I was nervous because I thought [the adult] was listening" and "It sometimes makes me nervous of the way I speak."

Absence of negative emotions

In-line with a hedonic definition of wellbeing, there were also findings in relation to an absence of negative emotions. For example, "less worried and scared" (Barber & Proops, 2019), "I think it's good having a therapy dog in school because if you're having a bad day, they can cheer you up…" (Zents et al., 2017), and "decrease anxiety" (Zents et al., 2017).

<u>Theme 3: Eudaimonic Wellbeing</u>

As discussed in the narrative literature review, eudaimonic wellbeing focuses on 'functioning' or 'doing well' (Huppert & So, 2011). I have given a lot of thought to what constitutes 'doing well' in relation to wellbeing and it remains somewhat of a grey area in relation to reading achievement/improvement. Considering Seligman's PERMA model (2011)

includes ‘achievement,’ it was decided that findings relating to achievement will be considered. Therefore, this theme encompasses any finding related to achievement or self-actualisation (Maslow 1943).

Achievement

Several studies found that children perceived that the DAI increased their achievement. For example, Steel (2022) found that a participant felt that the dog “helps me to think.” Henderson et al. (2020) found that children felt an increased sense of achievement relating to their reading ability. Syrnyk et al. (2022) found that children felt that their reading skills had improved.

Desire to Work with Dogs in the Future

Pinto and Foukes (2015) found that after children had experienced the DAI, they felt that they wanted to work with dogs in the future. For example, “Another student began by stating she thought the program “would be boring,” but participation “changed me to work in the dog industry.” (p. 67). This was considered to link with self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943).

<u>Theme 4: Characteristics of the Dog</u>

In two studies (Barber & Proops, 2019; Syrnyk et al., 2022), children made reference to how they felt that characteristics of the dog supported their wellbeing.

Physical Appearance of the Dog

Children made reference to how the dog looked. For example, “ears are cute, eyes are pretty” and “cute face” (Barber & Proops, 2019).

Behaviour of the Dog

Children made reference to the behaviour of the dog in terms of how they felt this supported their wellbeing. This was linked to the dog listening in both Barber and Proops’ (2019) study and Syrnyk et al.’s (2022) study. For example, “I felt she listens to me” and “listens very well” (Barber & Proops, 2019), “I like reading to dogs because they are great listeners” (Syrnyk et al. 2022).

There was also a common theme across the two of these studies relating to the dog being non-judgemental. For example, “She doesn’t tell me off if I read a bit wrong” (Barber & Proops, 2019) and “[The dog] helped me to keep trying because I didn’t feel judged…” (Syrnyk et al., 2022). This appears to link with the hypothesis that dogs embody Rogers’ (1989) core conditions (Jenkins et al., 2014) in that a non-judgemental stance would be in-line with unconditional positive regard.

Theme 5: Relationships

Four of the studies found that children viewed or experienced the DAI affecting their relationships (Henderson et al., 2020; Pinto & Foulkes, 2015; Sorin et al., 2015; Zents et al., 2017).

Parent-Child Relationship

This was found in relation to parent-child relationship in one study – for example Henderson et al. (2020) found that the children talked about the DAI with their parents often.

Teacher-Child Relationship

One study (Sorin et al., 2015) found that children felt the DAI had improved their relationship with their teacher. For example “Yes, I was mucking up in class…I didn’t [really] know the teacher but now I do and I don’t muck up.”

Child-Dog Relationship

Three studies found that children felt the DAI had either improved their relationships with dogs or highlighted the importance of the relationship with the dog (Pinto & Foulkes, 2015; Sorin et al., 2015; Zents et al., 2017). For example, Pinto and Foulkes (2015, p. 68) summarise one participant’s views:

“She went on to explain that she developed a very close bond with one dog in the program (Finnegan). The relationship she had with the dog motivated her to want to come to school and to arrive on time. During the interview, she cried when she discussed the program coming to an end because her regular contact with Finnegan would end.”

Sorin et al. (2015, p. 31) provide a participant quote in-line with this “*I’ve been getting along [with dogs], getting better and better.”*

Theme 6: School Climate

One study found children felt that the DAI had an effect on their school climate (Zents et al., 2017). This included children being proud of their school for having a therapy dog, increased engagement in class, increased attendance at school, and increased motivation for school.

2.7.8 *Systematic Literature Review Summary and Conclusion*

This SLR aimed to answer the following question:

What does previous research indicate about children's views and experiences of interacting with dogs to support their wellbeing in school settings?

It is important to reiterate that the overall quality of the eight included studies was judged to be relatively low. The available literature is limited in relevance, appropriateness, and methodological quality, where findings are limited in depth. This means that the evidence base and therefore understanding in relation to the SLR question is relatively weak and uncertain. Therefore, conclusions drawn from this SLR should be interpreted with caution. With this in mind, the SLR suggests that children have experienced DAI's in schools in different ways. The majority of the research specifically looks at RTD, but two studies looked at interactions with dogs more broadly. All studies indicated that children experienced a positive impact upon their hedonic wellbeing from the DAI, including feelings of happiness, excitement, and calmness. Only half of the studies found that children experienced improvements in their eudaimonic wellbeing including sense of achievement and desire to work with dogs. The studies also indicated that children viewed characteristics of the dogs as supportive of wellbeing such as listening and being non-judgemental. Research has also indicated that children experience positive or improved relationships with parents, teachers, and dogs. Lastly, one study found that children view DAIs as having an impact on their school's climate such as improved attendance.

2.7.9 *Contribution of Grey Literature*

During the process of writing both the narrative literature review and the SLR, I encountered several pieces of grey literature relevant to children's views and experiences of DAIs in schools. As grey literature was not included in the SLR, the contribution of these

studies in terms of children's views on DAIs supporting their wellbeing in schools will be considered briefly here.

Through reference chaining Baird et al.'s (2022) SLR, two relevant qualitative grey literature studies were found (Geist, 2013; Mitchell, 2019). Geist's (2013) study also came up during the SLR search and was excluded due to being grey literature. I could not access the full text of Mitchell (2019) and so it was not possible to consider this study. Geist (2013) conducted a study in the US. Geist (2013) used content analysis to analyse interviews with middle school and high school students with mental health disorders around whether therapeutic elements operate between therapy dog and student. She found two key findings – 1) the dogs supported the students with affect regulation development; and 2) the dogs supported the reworking of insecure attachments.

Lastly, by reference chaining Barber and Proops (2019) study, I encountered Davison (2015), a Doctorate in Educational Psychology thesis from the University of East London. Davison (2015) conducted a mixed-methods study exploring children's experiences of RTD in primary schools and the impact on reading. She used grounded theory to analyse the children's experiences and found that 'playful reading' was developed during RTD which included establishing a mental capital of positive emotions and a close relationship with the dog. The dogs' ability to demonstrate listening was also highlighted as important.

2.8 Implications for EP Practice

Individual level work

From this SLR, there is more convincing evidence of a positive impact upon children's hedonic wellbeing than eudaimonic wellbeing. Therefore, when an assessment has shown that a child has a need relating to how they are feeling, it would be appropriate for EPs to recommend a DAI to support with this. There is less convincing evidence from this SLR of the perceived outcomes for eudaimonic wellbeing and so EPs should be cautious about recommending DAIs to support how a child is doing. There is limited evidence of children's perceptions on why DAIs support wellbeing (e.g. characteristics of the dog and relationships) and so this may make it challenging for EPs to support school staff with understanding why they are implementing a DAI. Furthermore, as most of the studies included looked specifically

at RTD, the activities with the dog that may support wellbeing are unclear and so this would be challenging for EPs supporting schools with developing a DAI.

Organisational and systems level work

Half of the studies showed that DAIs are linked with improved relationships and so this provides tentative evidence to guide EPs when supporting schools to implement wider change such as developing behavioural/relational policies.

2.9 The Current Study

2.9.1 *Rationale and Unique Contribution*

Children's Wellbeing and School Dogs

The initial narrative literature review highlighted how children's SEMH needs are on the rise (NHS Digital, 2022), particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic (Cui & Hong, 2021). This is concerning as unsupported SEMH needs can lead to negative health and social outcomes (World Health Organisation, 2022). Schools have an important role in supporting children's wellbeing (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015). To inform the interventions and support that schools can provide for children's wellbeing, it has been highlighted how important and valuable it is to gain children's perspectives (Coombes et al., 2013). There is a range of research documenting a positive link between AAI and wellbeing, with dogs argued to be the most commonly used and most cost-effective animal for schools to have (Barker et al., 2016).

The Current Gap in the Literature

Previous research exploring children's views and experiences on school dogs has largely focused upon children reading to dogs with the exception of just three studies identified from the SLR and grey literature. These three studies include Pinto and Foulkes (2015), Zents et al. (2017), and Geist (2013). The gap with these three studies is two-fold. Firstly, all were conducted outside of the UK. Secondly, these studies all used descriptive qualitative methodologies which although provide useful insight, it is argued that these thematic approaches can limit understanding and lack important detail for how children make sense of their experiences of a complex phenomenon such as wellbeing (Mashford-Scott et al., 2012). Phenomenology on the other hand, explores the language individuals use to

describe their experiences to understand their perspectives and meaning more clearly (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). By having a deeper, richer understanding of how 'themes' are experienced, this can lead to the development of interventions that are more attuned to children's needs (Smith, 2003).

As highlighted in the SLR, there are some studies that explore children's perceptions of how school dogs affect their wellbeing. All of the SLR studies showed children's experiences of improved hedonic wellbeing (feelings of happiness, excitement, and calmness). Half of the SLR studies found that children experienced improvements in their eudaimonic wellbeing (sense of achievement and desire to work with dogs). There is a gap in the literature exploring children's perceptions of how school dogs affect their wellbeing in an in-depth way.

Additionally, as highlighted in Baird et al.'s (2022) SLR, there is a lack of research into why DAIs in schools may affect children's wellbeing. There is some limited (and often dated) research which offers some insight into children's perceptions of why dogs affect their wellbeing. For example, Triebenbacher (1998) found that children had attachment-like perceptions of their pets and Jenkins et al. (2014) found that children perceived school dogs to possess Rogers' (1989) three core conditions. There is therefore a gap in the literature exploring children's perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing in an in-depth way.

<u>How the Present Study Aims to Address this Gap</u>

The present study seeks to uniquely explore children's lived experiences of dogs supporting their wellbeing in UK primary and secondary schools. This is not limited to RTD but will explore a range of interactions with school dogs. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) will be used to provide an in-depth understanding of this which is not a methodology that has been used in the previous research in this area. It is hoped that this will guide schools, as well as guiding EPs to support schools, with developing DAIs that are more attuned to children's wellbeing needs. As this has not been done before, I aimed to keep the sample broad, therefore focusing on both mainstream primary and secondary schools, from Key Stage 2 – Key Stage 4, to ensure that children had rich enough language for IPA.

2.9.2 *Aim and Research Questions:*

Stemming from the literature review and rationale above, the overall aim of the present study was to explore how children make sense of their views and experiences of school dogs supporting their wellbeing. To do this, there are two research questions to guide inquiry into specific aspects of this:

- What are children's perceptions of *how* school dogs affect their wellbeing?
- What are children's perceptions of *why* school dogs affect their wellbeing?

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter will begin by considering the methodological orientation of the research including the ontological and epistemological positions which informed the aim and research questions, as well as the research strategies. The importance of critical reflexivity will then be presented, followed by an overview of, and rationale for using IPA including its limitations, and alternative data analysis methods. Ethical considerations will then be described; ethical approval for the current research was gained in May 2023 (Appendix 8). This will be followed by describing the research design, and the process of data analysis. The final part of this chapter will consider how quality of qualitative research can be established and how this is achieved in the present research. An explanation of my decision-making process will be provided throughout.

3.2 Methodological orientation

3.2.1 Overview

When seeking to answer a research question it is important to consider the nature of reality (ontology) and the nature of knowledge (epistemology) to select an appropriate method and tool for providing an answer. This can be informed by the researcher's own views of the world (Willig, 2013).

3.2.2 Ontological position

Ontology is a branch of philosophy pertaining to the theory of reality. It asks, 'What is there to know?' (Willig, 2013). According to Willig (2013), ontological positions can be described as on a continuum from 'realist' to 'relativist.' With realism, the world is made up of structures and objects that have a cause-and-effect relationship and there is a single reality out there. Relativism assumes that there are multiple realities that are socially constructed through language based on individuals' social interactions and experiences within the context of time and history (Gergen, 2001). In other words, with relativism, our interpretation of the world is not a mirror reflection of how things are, but rather our minds read and construct how things are (Sullivan & Forrester, 2018).

The present research aligns with a relativist ontological position as it sought to explore how children make sense of their views and experiences of interacting with a school dog to support their wellbeing. These views and experiences are dependent upon participants' individual interpretations and upon the contexts in which the phenomenon occurred, and so the study is not proposing that there is one single reality, but there are multiple realities for how and why interacting with school dogs supports children's wellbeing.

3.2.3 Epistemological position

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy pertaining to the theory of knowledge. In relation to reality, it asks, 'How can we know?' (Willig, 2008). This involves considering the nature of knowledge and the validity and reliability of claims to knowledge. Epistemological stances can be objective or subjective; the former is associated with a realist ontological position, whereas the latter can be associated with both realism and relativism (Mertens, 2015).

As the current research is aligned with a relativist ontology, a subjectivist epistemological stance is adopted as I will be applying my own interpretation of participants' interpretations (Mertens, 2015). In the current research, children were viewed as having interpreted their own subjective meaning about their individual experiences of interacting with school dogs. Through my interactions with them, I aimed to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences where I applied my own interpretation. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that this research will be influenced by my own values and culture (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016).

3.2.4 Paradigms in research

A paradigm can be defined as a world view that is underpinned by a particular ontological and epistemological position (Mertens, 2015). My ontological and epistemological positioning for the current research aligns with the interpretivist paradigm. In other words, the current research does not seek one objective generalisable truth but accepts that there are multiple truths subject to interpretation (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

The current research also adopts a phenomenological orientation which sits within interpretivism. This aims to produce knowledge about participants' subjective experience of

a phenomenon (Robson & McCartan, 2016). As the current research aims to explore how children make sense of their experiences, a phenomenological approach is suitable for understanding participants' thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, of a phenomenon.

A number of quantitative studies exploring school dogs and children's wellbeing exist (Beetz, 2013; Fujisawa et al., 2016). Quantitative designs are useful when a research question can be answered with numerical data such as answering 'how much' or 'to what extent' a phenomenon occurs (Cohen et al., 2017). However, the aim and research questions of the current study are concerned with Children's views and experiences meaning that a quantitative design is inappropriate as reducing these down to numbers means that insight and detail are lost. Instead, a qualitative design is appropriate where data in the form of language can answer the research questions (Taylor, 2013). As previous qualitative studies in this research area appear to provide surface level descriptive themes (Bruneau et al., 2023; Henderson et al., 2020), an in-depth exploratory qualitative method of investigation was chosen for the present research to allow for an in-depth exploration into children's experiences and views.

3.2.5 Reflexivity and positionality

Due to the epistemological positioning of this research, it was important for me, as the researcher, to consider how I inevitably influenced the research process and findings. Reflexivity is integral to qualitative research, and it can be described as a form of critical thinking that aims to highlight how the researcher and participants influence each other and thus how this influences the research process and findings (Lazard & McAvoy, 2020). As I aimed to make sense of what participants said, this required close engagement with the data where I offered my own interpretation. To facilitate reflexivity, I kept a research journal as recommended by Smith et al. (2022) where I recorded my reflections on how my thoughts, feelings, and my own social world may have influenced the research process and findings throughout. Examples of these are presented throughout this chapter in boxes.

Langdridge (2007) highlighted the importance of a researcher being explicit about their own background and beliefs to increase the trustworthiness of qualitative research. This helps to acknowledge differences between myself and the participants in this study. I am a white 30-year-old female. I did not have any experience of interacting with school dogs whilst

I was at school and so I do not share with participants the particular experience being explored in this study. I do however have experience of owning a dog and perceiving a positive impact of this upon my own wellbeing. Therefore, I acknowledge that my world view will be different from the participants' world views, but with some similarities.

It is also important to consider what has influenced my motivation to explore this research topic. Firstly, my own positive experience of owning a dog has influenced my values and beliefs in such a way that I am I aware I will seek to present the children's experiences in this study positively. Secondly, my motivation to explore children's wellbeing has been driven by my work as a trainee educational psychologist (TEP) and my desire to carry out research that is relevant for the educational psychology field. As already highlighted within the literature review, children's wellbeing has declined in recent years (NHS, 2021) and supporting SEMH needs has been a focus of my work, as well as a focus for the service I work in. This therefore will have also influenced my desire to make a difference for children's wellbeing and may also influence me to portray participants' experiences positively. Lastly, whilst being on placement in different local authorities (LAs), I have noticed schools utilising dogs to support students which I was intrigued by. This led to a discussion with my placement supervisor who shared that they had recently been involved in a tribunal where a parent had requested that their child accessed a dog in school, but this was not something my supervisor could recommend due to a limited evidence-base. This again I feel may have influenced my desire to portray participants' experiences in a positive light. I have remained aware of these considerations throughout the research process to make a conscious effort of noting reflections in my journal to not assume that participants' experiences were the same as mine.

3.3 Qualitative approaches

This research aims to explore how children make sense of their experiences of interacting with a school dog to support their wellbeing. I considered several qualitative approaches and their appropriateness for my aim, research questions, and the interpretivist paradigm. These are outlined below along with my decision-making process for why I considered IPA to be the most appropriate. This is followed by a more detailed outline of IPA, it's theoretical basis and its limitations.

Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) is a qualitative method that I initially considered using in the early planning stages of the current research. TA provides descriptive themes across participants relevant to a topic of interest. This can offer a broad understanding of experience (Braun & Clarke, 2021). As highlighted in the literature review, TA has been used for a number of studies in this topic area (e.g. Henderson et al., 2020 & Steel, 2022). This data tended to be descriptive and often 'thin' whereby participants did not have opportunity to expand upon their answers. Therefore, for the current research to provide a unique contribution to the field, I wanted to take a deeper dive into individual children's experiences than TA would allow (Spiers & Riley, 2019). This is a key distinction between IPA and TA – Spiers and Riley (2019) highlight how TA offers breadth, whilst IPA offers depth.

Grounded theory

As with IPA, grounded theory is a qualitative method that focuses on the perspective of individuals who have had a common experience. However, grounded theory seeks to generate inductive theories through looking at commonalities between participants and does not seek to understand individuals' personal lived experience in detail (Charmaz, 2003). As the aim of the current research was focused on the latter, grounded theory was deemed an unsuitable method. Additionally, Backman and Kyngas (1999) highlight the particularly time-consuming nature of grounded theory which further confirmed this as an unsuitable method for the limited timeframe of the present research.

Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is a qualitative method that examines language in detail. It focuses on language in terms of *what* language is used as well as *how* the language is used (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Discourse analysis focuses on the text rather than the participant, and it can be criticised as it ignores the role of participants' cognitions and their social context (Willig, 2013). Therefore, I did not deem this a suitable method for exploring subjective experience (Willig, 2013). I acknowledge that there is a discursive element to IPA such as during the exploratory noting stage, but discourse analysis is less hermeneutic than IPA and I acknowledge the influence of my values and beliefs and is therefore more in-line with IPA (Willig, 2013).

3.3.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA was chosen for several reasons. It is important to consider the philosophical and theoretical foundations of IPA to present my rationale for its selection as my methodology. The three key theoretical underpinnings of IPA are phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith et al., 2022). The following sections explore these constituents more closely.

3.3.1.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of experience. Over time, different philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre have taken different approaches to phenomenology, however, there tends to be a mutual interest amongst these philosophers in thinking about what human experience is like (Smith et al., 2022). The aspects of phenomenology that are important for the current research are considered in this section.

A pioneer in the field of phenomenology in the early 20th century, Husserl, argued that for phenomenological inquiry, one must 'go back to the things themselves.' By 'things,' he meant the experiential content of consciousness (senses, memories, judgements, and cognitions, for example) (Smith et al., 2022). Husserl believed that individuals do not always focus upon or pay attention to phenomena in the world because these are perceived in relation to pre-existing expectations (Smith et al., 2022). To focus upon the experiential content of consciousness, Husserl argued that a researcher must 'bracket off' their own preconceptions to become aware of the components of individuals' experience before us. This was termed epoché. Husserl believed it was possible to transcend our own experience of the world to view others' experience differently from our own social worlds (Langdridge, 2007).

Later philosophers such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre disagreed with Husserl and argued that it is not possible to completely bracket off one's preconceptions as meaning making and interpretation are at the heart of human experience (Langdridge, 2007). Heidegger emphasised the view of a 'person in context' where he argued that 'being in the world' is relative to something (Smith et al., 2022). Heidegger therefore argued that it is not possible to achieve epoché or gain knowledge that is free from some level of interpretation.

Merleau-Ponty argued that one can never completely share another's experience, because it is influenced by their own social world (Smith et al., 2022). Smith et al. (2022) highlight that reflective and reflexive thought can go some way to achieving this.

To summarise, IPA is both phenomenological and interpretive. It is phenomenological in that it looks at an individual's account of how a phenomenon has been understood by them. It is interpretive as it contextualises the individual's account by adopting Heidegger's 'person in context' approach where the interaction between a person and their social world is acknowledged and applied (Smith et al., 2022). The current research aligns with Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty's views by acknowledging that it is not possible to completely bracket off my own experience, preconceptions, and knowledge and that this can be aimed for by engaging in reflective and reflexive thought. Therefore, throughout my journey on this research project, I have kept a journal to record these thoughts.

3.3.1.2 Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation. This was previously an older and entirely separate strand of thought from phenomenology. However, as mentioned previously the work of philosophers such as Heidegger has necessitated the need for the two to come together (Smith et al., 2022).

Smith et al. (2022) suggest that to carry out data analysis in IPA, a researcher should engage in two processes - the double hermeneutic and the hermeneutic cycle. The double hermeneutic, Smith et al. (2022) suggest is a 'double interpretation' where the researcher attempts to make sense of the participant's sense making of the phenomenon being investigated. The hermeneutic cycle supports with the double hermeneutic which is an iterative cycle looking at the 'whole' to understand the 'parts' and looking at the 'parts' to understand the 'whole.' In the current research therefore, to analyse how children make sense of interacting with school dogs to support their wellbeing, I will need to look at parts of a participant's experience (e.g. the words or phrases they use) relative to the whole experience (e.g. the paragraphs or whole interview transcript), and to look at the whole experience relative to the parts.

3.3.1.3 Idiography

Rather than seeking to generalise findings about experience to a population (a nomothetic approach), IPA takes an idiographic approach. This means that there is a focus on the particular - a particular phenomenon (e.g. interacting with a school dog to support wellbeing) and how this has been understood by particular people (e.g. children) in a particular context (e.g. primary and secondary schools). There is also a focus on describing the particular in detail (Smith et al., 2022). To maintain idiography, I followed Smith et al.'s (2022) 7-step guidelines in the order they propose; I focused on analysing each participant's transcript in detail before moving onto the next and before looking at shared themes.

3.3.1.4 Rationale for IPA

To summarise, I selected IPA as my methodology due to its alignment with the experiential nature of my aim and research questions. The idiographic focus of IPA provides an in-depth insight into particular individuals' particular experience; this is delving deeper than previous research in this area and therefore providing a unique contribution towards the field of educational psychology. Additionally, the double hermeneutic in IPA complements the aim of this research and is aligned with where my motivations lie; I am seeking to understand how children make sense of their experiences and have a desire for this to contribute to promoting children's wellbeing, as well as having my own personal motivations based on my own experience of owning a dog.

3.3.1.5 Limitations of IPA

As with all methodologies, IPA has some limitations which were considered at the start of the research process. Firstly, IPA has been criticised for its reliance on participants' use of language to articulate their experiences (Willig, 2013). This can mean that if one's language is not fluent or competent enough, the researcher is not able to gain access to their experiences (Willig, 2013). This has led to IPA researchers often excluding potential participants who do not have a certain level of language competence, and so therefore cannot explore these individuals' experiences (Noon, 2019). This has been argued by some as elitist where only those with language skills get to share their experiences (Tuffour, 2017). Additionally, IPA's reliance on language means that a researcher cannot gain direct access to an individual's experience, but rather, participants use language to construct their experiences. Therefore,

it is unclear how close a researcher can get to participants' experience of phenomena using IPA. However, Willig (2013) argues that the interpretation from the researcher, adds meaning for future readers of the research.

Secondly, IPA has been criticised for its lack of standardised procedures which can lead to ambiguity (Giorgi, 2010). As a result, critics have argued that IPA findings can end up being too descriptive and that this can be avoided by taking time to ensure analysis is moving beyond the descriptive level towards a more analytical and interpretive level (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Aiming to ensure this, the current research carefully follows Smith et al.'s (2022) 7-step IPA guide and utilises Yardley's (2000) criteria for upholding quality in qualitative research.

Finally, whilst IPA can be praised for its idiographic nature in that it provides an in-depth insight into a small number of participants' experience, this can also be argued to be a limitation as it is not seeking to generalise findings to a population (Oxley, 2016). This in-depth insight may however offer similarities with others' experience which may assist our understanding of a phenomenon to inform future practice.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

This research was planned and implemented in accordance with the ethical issues presented in the British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics (British Psychological Society, 2010) and ethical approval was given by the University of Nottingham's School of Psychology Ethics Committee (Appendix 8: Ethical Approval). Particular consideration was given to fully informed consent, the right to withdraw, confidentiality, and protection from harm which are outlined in more detail in this section.

3.4.1 Fully Informed Consent

The school staff member who expressed interest on the initial questionnaire was sent a recruitment email (Appendix 9: school recruitment email) containing an information sheet about the research (Appendix 10: information sheet for school staff) and were then contacted by telephone to explore whether they were interested in their school taking part. School staff who were interested identified potential participants and gained verbal consent from parents/carers to share their contact details with me. School staff were also asked whether

any of the parents/carers were likely to experience any barriers in relation to accessing information via email. No accessibility barriers were raised for any of the parents/carers. All parents/carers were fully informed about all aspects of the research as they were sent an email (Appendix 11: Recruitment email sent to parents/carers) containing an information sheet (Appendix 12: Information sheet for parents/carers). Parents/carers were also emailed a child version of the information sheet (Appendix 13: information sheet for children) and asked to share this with their child and ask if they would like to take part. All parents/carers were also contacted by telephone the day after receiving this to give them the opportunity to ask any additional questions. Parents/carers were then sent a consent form (Appendix 14: consent form for parents/carers) to gain written consent for their child to take part. All parents/carers gave their written consent for their children to take part.

Before each interview, I shared the child information sheet with each participant and asked each individual if they had any questions. Participants were then asked to give their verbal consent to take part. Participants were also asked throughout the interview if they were happy to continue. All participants gave verbal consent to take part and shared they were happy to continue.

3.4.2 The Right to Withdraw

Parents/carers were informed on the information sheet that they had the right to withdraw their child from the research at any point, up until the date the interviews were transcribed. Parents/carers were also reminded of this during the phone call. No parents/carers withdrew their child before, during, or after the interviews. The participants were also informed of their right to withdraw on the children's information sheet and reminded just before the interview who to speak to if they wish to withdraw.

3.4.3 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Interviews were audio-recorded using Microsoft Teams on a password protected laptop stored in a secure location. Audio recordings were destroyed as soon as transcription had been completed. Recordings were transcribed verbatim where pseudonyms were used for any people's (and dogs') names. Any other identifiable information such as names of schools or places were omitted and replaced with 'X.' Parents/carers were informed through the information sheet and the telephone calls that participants would, as far as possible,

remain anonymous within the research write up; parents/carers were informed that there was the possibility of being identified through the content of the data – for example, if a participant shares an experience that a reader can then recognise.

3.4.4 Protection from Harm

I considered there to be a small risk of psychological harm or discomfort for the participants in this research due to reflecting on, and discussing personal experiences which may be perceived by the participants as difficult. Steps were taken to reduce the possibility of this. Firstly, children were not eligible to take part in the research if they were considered to be at higher risk of psychological harm (see sample selection section for details). These eligibility criteria (Appendix 15: A Table to Show the Study's Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria) were presented on the information sheets for school staff and parents/carers and it was checked during the phone calls with staff and parents/carers whether participants met these. At the start of all interviews, I asked participants for the name of a member of school staff who they could go and speak to if they felt at all distressed after taking part. They were also asked how they were feeling throughout the interview and whether they wished to continue. I asked participants how they were feeling after the interview and reminded them who they would talk to if they felt they needed to. One participant was considered to be of slightly higher risk as they had recently finished receiving counselling. Due to this, extra steps were taken to reduce the possibility of harm for this participant – I asked the participant's parent how she would feel about reflecting on her experiences and I gave an example of a question within the interview schedule. The parent felt their child would not feel distressed and is doing well since the counselling ended. I also provided prompts more frequently throughout this interview asking the participant if they felt okay to continue.

At the end of each interview, oral debriefing took place with the participants where they were asked if they had any questions about the research and these were answered. Participants were reminded of who they could ask in school if they had any questions at a later date. A debrief form was then emailed to all participants' parents/carers (Appendix 16: debrief form), reminding them of their right to withdraw and to encourage them to contact me if they had any questions. Contact details for my research supervisor and the Chair of the Ethics Committee were also provided if parents/carers wished to discuss anything further.

3.5 Research Design

3.5.1 Participant Selection

3.5.1.1 Sample Selection

The research took place within a county in the Midlands. A purposive sample was used to identify participants who were able to offer insight into the phenomenon being investigated (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, only children who had experienced interacting therapeutically with a school dog in primary and secondary schools to support their wellbeing for at least 4 weeks and children with English language proficiency of Key Stage 2 or above were selected (see Appendix 15: Table of Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria). I decided upon the 4-week mark based on this providing enough exposure to the phenomenon for participants to draw upon a range of experiences. The Key Stage 2 level English language competence was selected, based on my own experience of primary teaching, so that participants were able to articulate their experience as highlighted by Smith et al. (2022). See the ethical considerations section for my rationale for the exclusion criteria.

According to Smith et al. (2022), a sample in an IPA study should seek to be fairly homogenous, but this is dependent upon the specificity of the study. Children within my placement LA who had interacted with a school dog to support their wellbeing was a specific population of interest and limited in number. Therefore, the fairly homogenous nature of the sample was satisfied as participants had this mutual experience meaning that the research questions were relevant for them, as well as all being at a mainstream school in the same LA (Langdridge, 2007; Smith et al., 2022).

Smith et al. (2022) do not prescribe a certain number of participants for IPA. They suggest that 6-10 participants is typical for research at a professional doctoral level, and that it is important to consider the detailed, in-depth nature of IPA as the more data, the more time consuming the process. They suggest that more than ten data sets may not allow researchers enough time to engage in the IPA process in sufficient depth. Therefore, the final number of participants included in this research was seven. Each participant was interviewed once so there were seven interviews. Participants were recruited from four schools in total – School A, B, C, and D. See Table 5 below for participants' demographic information to support contextualising of the sample .

Table 5: A Table to Show Participants' Demographic Information

Pseudonym	**Gender**	**Age (years)**	**National Curriculum Year**	**School Recruited From**	**Mainstream School Setting Type**	**Percentage of children at the school who are eligible for free school meals (%)** *(information gained from government website)*	**School dog(s) pseudonym(s)**	**How long have they seen the dog for?**
Kyle	Male	11	6	A	Smaller than 1-form entry (mixed classes) village primary	8	Barney	3 years
Lara	Female	11	6	A	Smaller than 1-form entry (mixed classes) village primary	8	Barney	3 years
Elijah	Male	12	7	B	8-form entry secondary	14	Ruby	9 months
Aurelia	Female	12	7	B	8-form entry secondary	14	Ruby	6 months
Sophie	Female	9	4	C	2-form entry suburban primary	37	Moose	9 months

Amber	Female	10	5	D	2-form entry suburban primary	39	Henry, Suzie & Max	18 months
Daisy	Female	10	5	D	2- form entry suburban primary	39	Henry, Suzie & Max	18 months

3.5.1.2 Recruitment of Participants

As highlighted above, the present research sought a specific population. I gained access to this population by contacting gatekeepers - school staff members who could identify children who had interacted with a school dog. To do this, I emailed all the EPs within my placement EPS requesting for them to pass on a Microsoft Forms questionnaire to their school contacts. The questionnaire (Appendix 17: initial questionnaire sent to schools within the LA) was to help identify schools with potential participants, and asked for them to leave their contact details if they were happy to be contacted about the research in the future. Ten mainstream schools left their details.

I contacted these ten schools via email six months later with the information sheet (Appendix 10: information sheet for school staff) and asked them whether they had any children in mind who met the eligibility criteria. One school responded to the email saying they did not have any potential participants. Two schools responded to the email saying they had potential participants, and I phoned these schools to discuss the eligibility criteria and further details of the research. Staff members from these two schools then contacted four children's parents to ask for verbal consent to share their contact details with me. All four parents consented and so I contacted them via email (see Appendix 11: recruitment email to parents/carers) and phone call – see ethical considerations section. As seven of the schools had not responded to my initial email, I broadened my search for participants by phoning these schools. This identified two more schools with a further three potential participants. The same strategy as the initial two schools was followed to contact these parents.

3.5.2 Data Collection

3.5.2.1 Selecting a Suitable Method

Following guidance from Smith et al. (2022), semi-structured interviews were selected as the tool for gathering data in the present study. This was because they are considered an optimal tool for gathering rich, detailed accounts pertaining to individuals' experiences which IPA requires (Smith et al., 2022). Unstructured interviews were not selected as Smith et al. (2022) highlights that having no structure can lead to researchers feeling anxious, which may be picked up on by participants and affect how comfortable they are to share their experiences. I felt this would have been the case for me as I was new to qualitative research,

and I would have been anxious about deviating from the research's aim and research questions. Structured interviews were also not selected as they may have limited participants' opportunity to freely share details pertinent to their social world which I may not have anticipated (Smith et al., 2022). Using semi-structured interviews allowed some structure to stay focused on the aim and research questions, whilst also giving participants the flexibility to share details pertinent to them.

3.5.2.2 Interview Schedule Development

Following guidance in Smith et al. (2022), I developed an interview schedule (Appendix 18: Interview Schedule) which included questions to facilitate a discussion linked to relevant topics to the research questions and the themes emerging from the literature. I developed the schedule to include a range of question types. As suggested by Smith et al. (2022), the schedule began with an open descriptive question to help the participants to feel at ease such as 'Tell me about [the school dog].' Other question types included analytical questions such as 'In what ways does spending time with the school dog affect how you feel?' and evaluative questions such as 'If there was a headteacher who wasn't sure whether getting a school dog would be a good idea or not, what would you say to them?' (Smith et al., 2022).

As the potential sample population was limited in number, I decided not to pilot the interview schedule with the target population to not limit the potential dataset included in data analysis. However, I piloted the schedule with a family member and discussed the wording of the questions with my research tutor. This helped me to develop the schedule by avoiding closed questions and to develop a range of prompts to break down the questions for the participants and to elicit data that focused on their lived experiences. I also listened back to the first two interviews to reflect on the questions asked and my approach to adapt future interviews.

Reflexivity: Listening back to my first two interviews allowed me to make a note of anything that I felt I should change in relation to the interview schedule which allowed me to be critically reflexive. I noted that in my second interview question, I had asked about when they have "worked with" the dog. This seemed to confuse the first participant, Kyle and I wonder if I had been influenced by conducting my literature review in that a lot of the research focuses upon reading to dogs and this may have led participants to narrow their responses to focus upon work related interactions with the dogs. Therefore, this was changed to "spend time with" for subsequent interviews. Furthermore, I made a note of any thoughts, feelings, or reflections I had in my journal after each interview to support me with adapting the questions asked or prompts used.

3.5.2.3 Conducting the Interviews

Each participant was interviewed once on a one-to-one basis which took place at their respective schools. Prior to the interview beginning, I went through the information sheet (Appendix 13: information sheet for children) with each participant emphasising that their participation is voluntary and they can withdraw up until the date of transcription. They were given opportunity to ask any questions. All participants verbally consented to taking part. I verbally debriefed participants at the end of the interview and sent out a debrief form to parents afterwards. No participants were withdrawn at any point of the study.

Before the interviews started, I spent some time rapport building with the participants to allow them to feel at ease. This included engaging in general conversation such as about school and hobbies. For one participant this involved playing some brief games such as 'noughts and crosses' and 'hangman' as we waited for a WiFi password. Rapport building also included meeting the school dog(s), some of whom were present in the room during the interviews.

As highlighted in my ethics application, I asked participants to share personal experiences which may be perceived by them to be difficult. I remained vigilant throughout the interview to any signs of distress shown by participants, as well as checking in with

whether they are happy to continue during the process. There were no signs or reports of distress and so no interviews were terminated.

Reflexivity: When I listened back to the first two interviews, I noted that (perhaps due to feeling apprehensive about my first interviews) I often jumped in with a prompt or follow up question quite quickly when the participant paused. I felt that had I let there be a longer pause, this could have allowed the participant to have more thinking and reflection time and could have possibly allowed the participant to provide further detail to their experience or to mention something else relevant to their experience that I wouldn't have thought of e.g. it would have had more of a phenomenological focus. From this reflection, I aimed to increase the length of any pauses in subsequent interviews. I found that in some instances, the participants did elaborate on their answers in the pauses, however, sometimes, after a short pause, participants appeared to lose focus and asked me what the question was again.

I considered how I was affected by conducting the interviews to understand how this may have impacted the participants. Some of the participants talked about emotive subjects such as parental separation or feeling lonely in school which I felt upset by. I considered my role as a researcher here and actively listened to the participants so that they felt heard, and I checked in with them throughout the interview that they were happy to continue. I also ensured I followed the planned debrief procedure and reminded participants of a trusted adult in their school they could speak to if they felt they needed to.

I felt as though the level of detail and insight varied across the participants. I felt that some of the participants found it challenging to consider some of their constructs and to articulate what these meant to them, perhaps as this is quite an abstract thing to do. Being new to IPA, I was left wondering whether the data I had gathered was 'detailed enough.' I found that there was a bit of a 'trade off' between attempting to scaffold this process for the participant e.g. phrasing prompts or questions in a different way, and pushing too much, which may have made the participant feel inadequate or anxious. Therefore, several of my attempts to gain deeper insight into their meaning making were not as successful as I had hoped, but in turn, all participants were happy to continue with the interview.

3.6 Data Analysis

3.6.1 Transcription

Interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams. I transcribed the interviews verbatim which provided the opportunity to familiarise myself and immerse myself in the data prior to analysis. Following guidance from Smith et al. (2022), as the purpose of IPA is to interpret the meaning of what an individual is saying, I focused on accurately recording spoken words rather than detailed recording of prosodic aspects. Notable prosodic aspects such as pauses, laughter, and interruptions were noted.

3.6.2 Process of Analysis

After I transcribed the interviews, I added each one to a separate Microsoft Word document ready for analysing. Doing this electronically was a personal preference as I felt this would be clearer to me than analysing the data by hand, and it would allow transparency of the process for future readers as I could clearly present each stage of the process.

Smith et al. (2022) highlight how there is no one prescribed way of data analysis in IPA, and they encourage a "healthy flexibility" (p. 75) with the process. Smith et al. (2022) argue that a key commonality between different IPA researchers' studies is the analytic focus which is geared towards understanding how participants make sense of their experiences. As a result, Smith et al. (2022) present a 7-step set of guidelines for data analysis that capture this analytic focus, as well as allowing flexibility. These guidelines are presented below, along with a summary of how I followed these.

Step 1: Reading and re-reading transcripts

For me, this step began during the transcription process as this required me to read and re-read the transcripts, to ensure it was in-line with the audio recording. Once transcribed, I listened to the audio recording twice whilst proof-reading the transcripts. Smith et al. (2022) identify that the vast range of possible connections or ideas within the data can become overwhelming and that at this stage, it is important to stay close to the data to understand the participants' experience from their perspective. Therefore, as suggested by Smith et al. (2022), whilst reading and re-reading the transcripts, I wrote down any initial thoughts, feelings, or reflections in my research journal to 'bracket off' my own views and

perspective until the later stages of analysis. This was an attempt to remain focused on what the participant's social world at this stage.

Step 2: Exploratory noting

I created a table on Microsoft Word for each participant's transcript where the first column contained lines of the transcript, the second column had space for exploratory noting, and the third column had space for the experiential statements (see Appendix 19 for an example). Following Smith et al.'s (2022) guidance, exploratory noting included making descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments, where I aimed to keep an open mind and note anything of interest.

Descriptive comments had a phenomenological focus where the content of what participants were saying was labelled in relation to how their thoughts and feelings were structured. This included key features of the content of what was spoken about such as type of interaction with the dog. (This is presented in a normal font in Appendix 19).

Linguistic comments focused on the language used by the participant. This included features such as use of pronouns, emotive adjectives, repetition, pauses, degree of fluency, and metaphors. (This is presented in the underlined font in Appendix 19).

Conceptual comments asked questions of the data to begin the move from a descriptive level to a more interpretive level, to reflect participants' world views from my own standpoint. (*This is presented in the italics font in Appendix 19*).

Reflexivity: I found that I was doubting myself at first with this stage as I didn't feel sure how far to move away from the transcript with the conceptual comments. This felt like a grey area for me and quite confusing. I felt that I was able to 'bracket off' my own values and views to provide descriptive comments, but this was trickier for the conceptual comments as this inevitably will involve my own interpretation. I discussed this with my research supervisor and read around this area to add clarity. I watched a YouTube video which described the hermeneutic cycle using the analogy of a food dish – how the complementary flavours of the parts of the dish offer more than just a sum of the parts themselves, and that we can understand how to reach this overall dish by understanding the parts that make it – and vice versa. This helped me to understand the aim of IPA and providing meaning through hermeneutics and I felt more confident to move away from the descriptive comments to ask questions of the data using my own interpretation. I felt more confident in offering my own interpretation of the data as I considered how appropriate this seemed for the participants' words in relation to the whole and vice versa.

I found that the exploratory noting process became more fluent as I moved through the transcripts.

Step 3: Constructing experiential statements

The aim of this stage was to review my exploratory notes to provide interpretive summaries. Experiential statements were recorded in the third column of the table (see Appendix 19 for an example). As noted by Smith et al. (2022), experiential statements can reflect both the original words used by participants and the researcher's interpretation.

Reflexivity: I found the hermeneutic cycle important to consider again here as I felt the need to check my experiential statements were appropriate based on the participants' words in relation to the sentences/paragraphs/whole transcript and vice versa. At first I found it difficult to consider the whole transcript, but through engaging in the exploratory noting, my recollection of the transcript as a whole improved.

Step 4: Searching for connections across experiential statements

Following guidance from Smith et al. (2022), I looked for connections across experiential statements for each participant in turn. See Appendix 20 to illustrate this process for Kyle.

Step 5: Naming the personal experiential themes (PETs) and consolidating and organising them into a table

Next, following guidance from Smith et al. (2022), I gave a title to the groups of experiential statements to name the personal experiential themes (PETs) for each participant. See Appendix 21: PET table for an example of how these were organised into a table for Kyle to support the reader's understanding of the analytic process. Quotes from the transcript were included to demonstrate how the experiential statements and PETs were grounded in the data.

Reflexivity: I found this an enjoyable experience as I was able to consider how my research questions have been answered by each participant. However, I found this to be a time-consuming process as initially I felt that some experiential statements would fit into a number of PETs. As a result, this involved some trial and error and re-grouping the experiential statements. I made the PETs more specific so that they fit into groups more discretely. Some of my experiential statements were duplicated at various points of the transcript and so these duplicates were removed.

Step 6: Continuing the individual analysis of other cases

Staying aligned with IPA's Idiographic commitment, steps 1-5 were followed for each individual participant, before moving onto the next participant.

Reflexivity: I found it challenging to analyse each participant's transcript 'afresh' without being influenced by steps 1-5 for previous participants. I found it helpful to have a break in between each and to read each transcript twice before the exploratory noting stage to familiarise myself with the uniqueness of each transcript. I also found the hermeneutic cycle important to come back to regularly to consider each participants' words in relation to their respective transcript.

Step 7: Working with PETs to develop group experiential themes (GETs) across cases

In-line with Smith et al. (2022), after PETs had been developed for all seven participants, I looked for similarities and differences between these to develop the GETs. GETs and sub-themes were named where a similar theme was present for more than half of participants (four or more out of seven). This involved coding experiential statements to ensure more than half of participants had discussed each GET and sub-theme. See Appendix 22a and 22b (Development of GETs for RQ1 and RQ2) to illustrate this process for research question 1 and 2 respectively. See Appendix 23a and 23b (The Prevalence of Each GET Across Participants for RQ1 and RQ2) for the prevalence of each GET and subtheme across participants. The GETs are presented in tables in Appendix 24a and 24b for research question 1 and 2 respectively, as well as visually in Chapter 4.

Reflexivity: Throughout the data analysis, I wondered whether I was getting an appropriate balance between 'bracketing off' my own social world and being 'interpretive enough.' I aimed to ensure the PETs and GETs were going a step further than being a 'sum of the parts.' I found that the linguistic comments helped me to develop more latent meanings. I looked at some studies using thematic analysis versus IPA which helped me to understand that it is the theoretical underpinnings of IPA and the more in-depth process of arriving at your PETs/GETs which is distinctive from thematic analysis. I found it helpful once I had my GETs to reflect on my analysis process and to read back through Smith et al.'s (2022) 7 steps; I felt confident that I had carefully followed the steps, and I felt reassured that I had utilised IPA how it is intended.

3.7 Quality within qualitative research

Quantitative research is often evaluated using 'scientific' criteria relating to validity and reliability. However, it is challenging to apply scientific criteria to qualitative research (Miyata & Kai, 2009). IPA does not seek generalisability or objectivity and acknowledges how the researcher influences the process and findings, so the same criteria would be inappropriate (Smith et al., 2022). It is possible to judge the trustworthiness of qualitative research, however. Smith et al. (2022) suggest that Yardley's (2000) criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research are appropriate for IPA research. Table 6 below outlines the

four principles of Yardley's (2000) criteria along with the measures I took to ensure the present research is in-line with these.

Table 6: A Table to show Yardley's (2000) Criteria and how these were Present in the Current Research

Yardley's (2000) Criteria	**Measures taken in this study**
Sensitivity to context *"Theoretical; relevant literature; empirical data; sociocultural setting; participants' perspectives; ethical issues"* (p. 219).	• Conducting the literature review increased my understanding of theories and previous research around school dogs supporting children's wellbeing which allowed me to be sensitive to the topic area. • Interviews were conducted in person in familiar settings for participants and at a time that worked for them, therefore demonstrating sensitivity to participants' sociocultural setting. • I engaged in reading around the implementation of IPA so that I could be sensitive to the conditions needed for IPA e.g. a small sample size where accounts were analysed in-depth. • Semi-structured interviews including the use of open questions and asking at the end if there was anything important that we hadn't already talked about allowed participants to share what was important to them and their experiences so that I could remain sensitive to participants' experiences. • My interpretation remained sensitive to the data – I provide quotes in Chapter 4 to evidence that my interpretation was grounded in the data. • I engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process to consider the interactive nature of the researcher-participant relationship. See section 3.2.5. • I have remained sensitive to ethical issues throughout – see section 3.4.

Commitment and rigour *"In-depth engagement with topic; methodological competence/skill; thorough data collection; depth/breadth of analysis"* (p. 219).	• By conducting a thorough literature review, I engaged in-depth with the topic area. • To develop my interviewing skills and to ensure thorough data collection, I engaged in reflexivity by listening back to the first two interviews and considering what I would adapt in subsequent interviews. See 3.5.2.2 and 3.5.2.3. I also engaged in discussions with my research tutor to reflect on the appropriateness of my interview schedule in answering my research questions. • I piloted my interview schedule with a family member to anticipate potential challenges and to develop suitable prompts to ensure data collection was as thorough as possible. • I had a small sample size to ensure in-depth engagement with the accounts was possible. I engaged extensively with each transcript before moving onto the next, in-line with Smith et al.'s (2022) guidance. • As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2021), I ensured to take my time with data analysis so that this was in sufficient depth. • Smith et al.'s (2022) 7-step guidelines were carefully followed, and I checked in with my research tutor and another TEP using IPA to ensure I had understood these steps in the way they were intended.
Transparency and coherence *"Clarity and power of description/argument; transparent methods and data presentation; fit between theory and*	• Each stage of the research process has been described clearly and in detail so that a reader can see what was done and why. Photos and tables have been included to aid transparency in the data analysis. • Coherence has been maintained throughout by my aim and research question stemming from the literature review, justifying the appropriateness of my research design in answering the questions, and conducting the analysis in-line with the theoretical assumptions of IPA.

method: reflexivity" (p.219).	• I have been explicit about my own positionality and my differences from the participants (see section 3.2.5) and have kept a research journal throughout the process. • Raw data has been offered in Chapter 4 to show that my interpretations are grounded in the data, and to allow for alternative interpretations and explorations.
Impact and importance *"Theoretical (enriching understanding); socio-cultural; practical (for community, policy makers, health workers)"* (p. 219).	• I have aimed for the literature review to highlight the gap in the knowledge base and to show the contemporary relevance of this study in supporting children's wellbeing. • Implications for practice have been presented for school staff and EPs to consider. • I will share the findings of the present study within the LA in which I will be working in once qualified (the same LA as where it was carried out).

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter will present the findings of the present study which aimed to explore how children make sense of their experiences of school dogs supporting their wellbeing. In-line with IPA's ontological and epistemological assumptions, it is important to note how the findings reflect the double hermeneutic. The Group Experiential Themes (GETs) and associated sub-themes will be presented, along with a close consideration of these and participant quotes to illustrate their meaning and significance in relation to the research questions.

4.1.1 Known Details of Participants' Interactions with the School Dogs

Table 7 below provides a summary of how and why participants interacted with the dogs. This information was gathered from the participants during the interviews.

Table 7: A Table to Show a Summary of Why and How Participants Interact with the School Dogs

Participant	How do they interact with the school dogs?	Why do they interact with the school dogs?
Kyle	Walking, doing tricks, playing tug of war, stroking. Sees the dog at transitions during the day e.g. after break time, on the way back from the toilet.	• Support with "feeling down." • Support with friendships.
Lara	Stroking, cuddling, 'meet and greet' at school gates, sitting in class with the dog, playing.	• Support with school attendance/emotional regulation during challenging family

		circumstances (e.g. parental separation).
Elijah	Stroking, cuddling, walking, talking to a staff member with dog present. Sees the dog at breaktimes, walks the dog on Fridays.	• Support with emotional regulation – particularly around feelings of anger according to Elijah.
Aurelia	Cuddling, playing fetch, walking, 'meet and greet' on arrival to school, talking to a staff member with dog present. Sees the dog at breaktimes.	• Support with anxiety about coming into school. • Support for emotional regulation.
Sophie	Walking, cuddling, stroking, playing, talking to the dog. Uses a 'time out' card to see the dog throughout the school day, whenever needed.	• Support for emotional regulation e.g. understanding and processing feelings, time out from class.
Amber	Walking, teaching the dog tricks, looking after the dog, playing, cuddling, giving the dog treats. Sees the dog at breaktimes.	• Support with emotional regulation – e.g. feeling "wound up" by peers in her class. • Wanting to learn as much about dogs so she can work with dogs in the future.

Daisy	Stroking, walking, looking after the dog. Sees the dog at breaktimes.	• Difficulties with friendships and feeling as though she had nothing to do at play times.

Overall, there seemed to be some commonalities as well as differences between the seven participants for how and why they interacted with the school dogs. For some children, interacting with the dogs seemed to be planned (e.g. 'meeting and greeting' upon arrival to school). For other children, their interactions with the dogs seemed to be more fluid and spontaneous (e.g. autonomously deciding to see the dog on their way in from breaktime). Sometimes, it seemed that the purpose of seeing the dogs was the direct interaction with the dogs themselves, whereas other times, the interactions with the dogs seemed to augment their interactions and relationships with staff members (e.g. chatting to a staff member whilst stroking the dog). Overall, it appeared that the children's interactions with the dogs were not prescribed or specific routine actions, but rather they were quite literally and simply interacting with the dogs.

4.2 Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

Two GETs were interpreted in answering the first research question (RQ1) 'What are children's perceptions of how school dogs affect their wellbeing?' These were *feeling good* and *functioning well* (see Figure 8 below). Five GETs were interpreted in answering the second research question (RQ2) 'What are children's perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing?' These were *emotional attachment, sense of belonging, characteristics of the school dogs, nature of interactions with school dogs,* and *changes in thoughts* (see Figure 9 below). The GETs and their associated sub-themes, and prevalence amongst participants are presented in Appendix 23a and 23b. Participant quotes associated with GETs and sub-themes can be seen in Appendix 24a and 24b.

Figure 8: A Visual Representation of Group Experiential Themes for Research Question 1

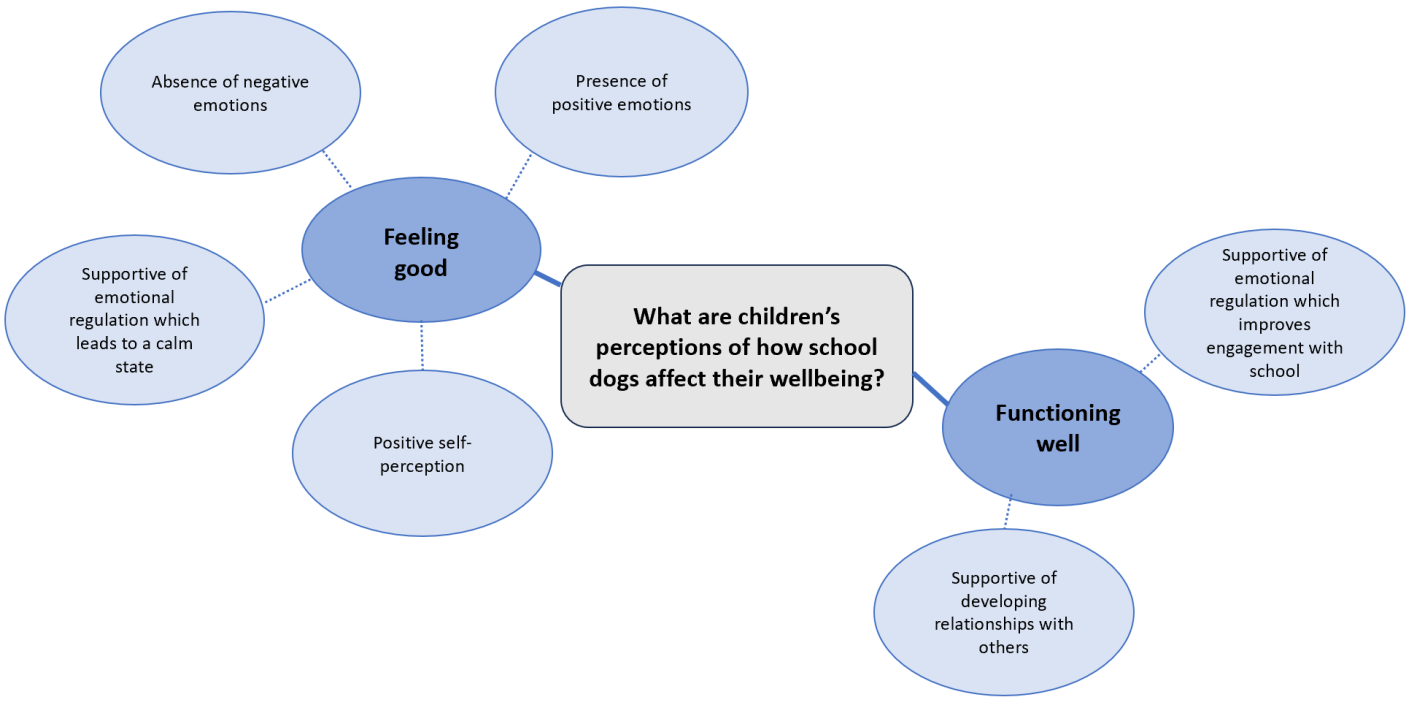
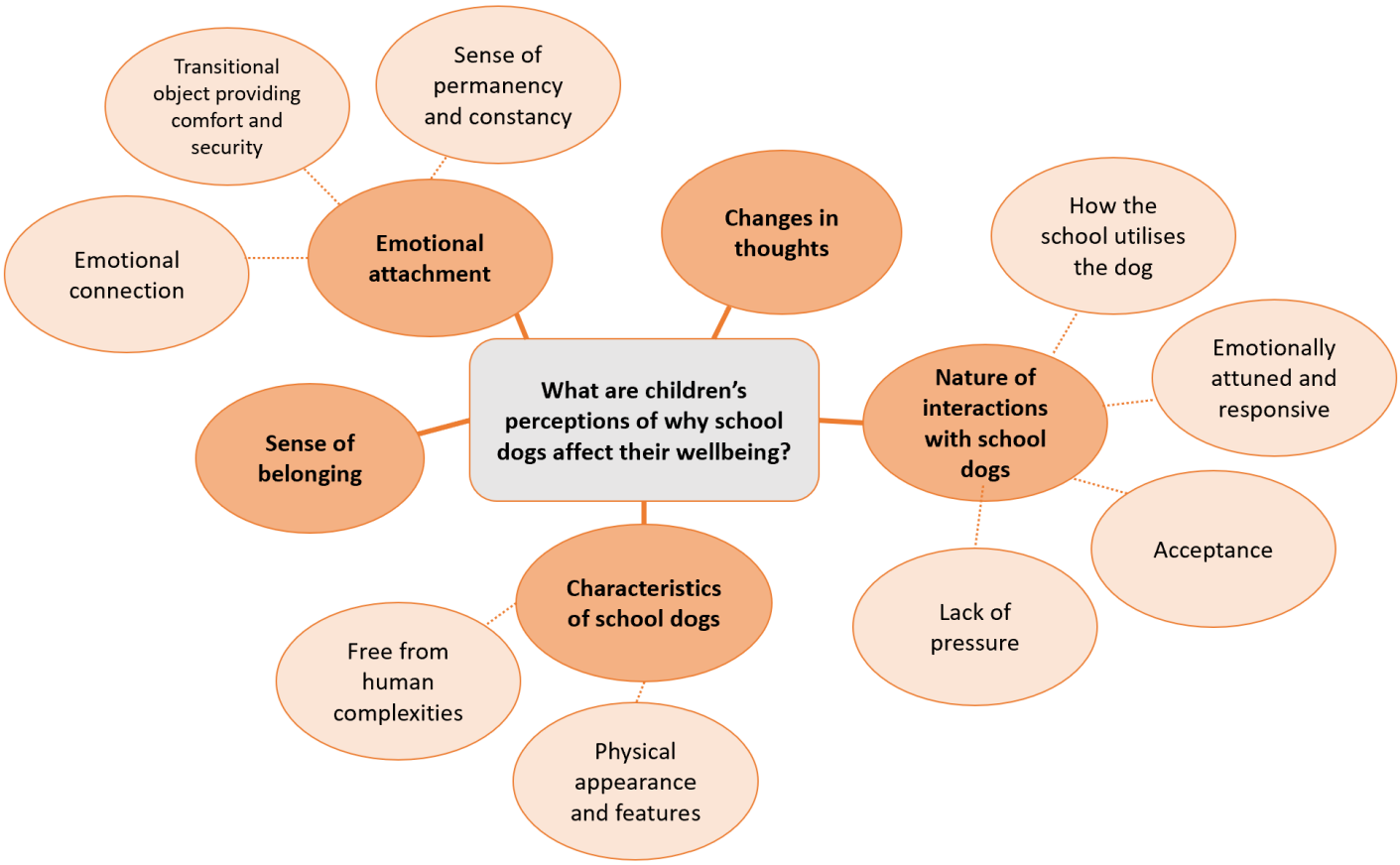


Figure 9: A Visual Representation of Group Experiential Themes for Research Question 2



4.3 Research Question 1: What are children's perceptions of how school dogs affect their wellbeing?

4.3.1 GET 1: Feeling Good

'Feeling good' was interpreted to be a salient theme for participants' perceptions of how school dogs affect their wellbeing. This appeared to be present across all participants' datasets suggesting it was an important shared experience for all. This is captured within the sub-themes: *presence of positive emotions, absence of negative emotions, supportive of emotional regulation which leads to a calm state*, and *positive self-perception.*

Presence of positive emotions

It was interpreted that all participants perceived that the 'presence of positive emotions' was an important part of their experience of 'feeling good.' Positive emotions seemed to include feelings of happiness, amusement, surprise, and affection towards the school dogs.

Feelings of 'happiness' appeared to be at the centre of all seven participants' accounts of how the school dogs affected their wellbeing; 'happy' is a seemingly simple construct, yet the centrality and prevalence of this throughout participants' transcripts connotes their perceptions of school dogs leading to the consistent and predictable presence of positive emotions for them. This felt particularly poignant in participants' experiences when referred to with such certainty e.g: *"they **always** make me happy"* (Daisy, 165).

'Happiness' seemed to be constructed and experienced differently across participants. It was interpreted that Amber experiences happiness as a warm feeling that develops when she plays with the school dog, *"When he's tackling me, it normally feels like.. in my mind I have one little spark in my mind that when Henry's with me, and he feels very energetic, it just starts erm let's say expanding and becoming all bright from what it was"* (357-359). There was a sense of emotional contagion from Amber's quote here which seems similar to a Lara's experience, "*I think it helps because when you see him happy, you start to think you're happy. And then that actually happens you do start to be happy"* (154-155) and Kyle's experience in that he felt, *"happy to see someone else happy"* (359).

Laughter was prevalent in six out of seven participants' transcripts when they shared their experiences of the school dogs. This was interpreted to indicate the presence of positive emotions. For example:

"Yeah. But then.. he likes to be petted. (pause) erm and sometimes (laughs) Mrs Jones gives him cut up bits of cocktail sausage as a treat" – Kyle 36-37

"She would lick the sun cream off my legs (laughs)" – Aurelia 137

Both of Kyle and Aurelia's quotes here were interpreted to suggest feelings of amusement when recounting their experiences of seeing the school dogs. They also both seemed to refer to actions of the dog which may interlink with other GETs such as characteristics of the school dogs as well as the nature of interactions with the school dogs. Similarly, Sophie referred to an experience that was interpreted to be amusing and surprising to her: *"I was on the floor and then she sat on my lap and so I thought that was really funny"* (215-216). This was interpreted to suggest she felt both surprised and amused at the dog's actions as typically a dog would sit on someone's lap when they are sat on a chair, but the dog seemed to do whatever she [the dog] liked. This appears to interlink with the GET characteristics of the dogs such as them being free from human complexities.

Elijah often described the school dog, Ruby as 'cute' where he seemed to refer to her physical appearance, affectionate nature, and overt desire for treats e.g:

"R: So why have you described Ruby as cute?
P: She's got a round face erm she gives big hugs erm I don't really know (pause) begging the owner for food" (25-27).

This was interpreted as Elijah feeling affection towards the school dog, therefore supporting the interpretation of the presence of positive emotions. Aurelia also described the same school dog, Ruby as 'cute,' but for Aurelia, it appeared that her construction of cute was more to do with the dog's playful nature e.g:

'R: "What else does she do that makes her cute?"

P: "you can run with her. You can play fetch with her. You can just play with her in general with toys and stuff and yeah, you can give her belly rubs she likes them a lot and yeah"' (40-43).

Absence of negative emotions

It was interpreted that the absence of negative emotions contributed towards several participants' experience of 'feeling good' and therefore their perceptions on how school dogs affect their wellbeing. This appeared to be a shared experience for four out of the seven participants. Participants seemed to experience the absence of perceived negative emotions such as worry, sadness, and anger.

Lara appeared to perceive that the school dog helps her when she is worrying about people she is close to. She referred to different family members during her interview including upsetting experiences such as her parents separating, her grandmother passing away, and her auntie's dog passing away. She shared, *"when I get upset or worried about someone, I usually let it go with some animals"* (58-59). It was interpreted from the language used e.g. *"let it go,"* that she felt a sense of relief from interacting with the school dog, where the dog contains her emotions, meaning that the weight of these emotions was lifted. This interpretation was supported by a further quote from Lara, "*it just makes me feel like all my worries are gone"* (147-148), therefore supporting the absence of negative emotions subtheme.

It was interpreted that Aurelia often feels a range of emotions that she perceives to be negative, and the school dog helps this to go away which she feels a relaxing physical benefit from e.g:

'P: (pause) *"well three quarters or half of my day is filled with bad emotions - sadness, anger, anxiety and others that I have no idea what they're called cause I can't identify my own emotions sometimes."*

R: *"mm-hmm"*

P: "*and erm when I feel calm, it's like all of that is gone, because with anxiety I can feel it physically and it has after-effects on me and it does not feel nice. So once I'm calm it, it would go away"'* – Aurelia, 229-235

During Aurelia's interview, there was a sense that the range of emotions she often feels and her perceived limited ability to identify these in herself was overwhelming for her. She also shared that when she sees the school dog, "*you're not really worrying about anything. You're*

not really having issues" (224-225). It was interpreted that for Aurelia, the absence of her negative emotions is linked with how she is functioning e.g. "not really having issues" which links with the 'functioning well' GET.

In contrast, during Elijah's interview, he often referred to feeling angry and how this has affected his behaviour in school. He frequently came back to talking about stroking the school dog and chatting to the dog's owner (a staff member) which was interpreted as helping him to regulate his emotions e.g:

"It's like erm I don't really know how to explain it, but it just helps me erm when I get angry, I can just go to [staff member], she'll talk to me, she'll have [school dog] with her, and she'll let me stroke her" (43-45).

This was interpreted to mean his perceived negative emotion of anger would go away, therefore supporting the absence of negative emotions subtheme.

The absence of sadness seemed to be an important experience of seeing school dogs for both Lara and Daisy.

"And then when I see his little tail wagging (laughs) it just… I just feel like that sadness is gone away. It's into a big bubble. It's just blown away. And then..
like the happiness has just popped and it's come back to me." - Lara (190-192)

"When I'm sad I always go see them [the school dogs]." – Daisy (180)

These accounts highlight how important the absence of negative emotions seems to be for 'feeling good' and therefore wellbeing for children in school.

Supportive of emotional regulation which leads to a calm state

'Supportive of emotional regulation which leads to a calm state' was interpreted as a subtheme contributing to participants' experience of 'feeling good.' Emotional regulation in this context was interpreted as a process by which individuals control their emotional state. This appeared to be a shared experience for four out of the seven participants.

The experience of stroking the school dogs was spoken about frequently by participants, suggesting this is a key important part of their interactions with the dogs. For example, **"***she'll let me stroke her and it just calms me down"* (Elijah, 45). The repetitive act of

stroking was interpreted to be linked to Elijah's emotional regulation allowing him to feel calm. Furthermore, Elijah's use of the language *"let me"* gave a sense of the dog remaining calm. Interestingly, Sophie used this same phrase as Kyle, *"It just means to me like.. she like.. she's a very helpful dog.. she helps people with when they have like issues and they and she* ***lets them*** *stroke her and stuff"* (52-53). Sophie also referred to the school dog as a therapist, "*That's going back to the dog therapist thing. She like calms me down"* (142-143). This use of metaphor was interpreted to mean that for Sophie, the school dog is someone who is there to listen and guide you to feel better. Perhaps for Elijah and Sophie stroking the school dogs feels like an exclusive thing to do and that the dogs have a sense of which children need their support and only those who are in need are 'allowed' to stroke the dogs. This may interlink with the 'nature of interactions with school dogs' GET, specifically the 'emotionally attuned and responsive' subtheme.

Aurelia also referred to stroking the school dog and she was asked what stroking the dog is like for her. *"It makes me happy. It makes me feel calm, comforted because it's like.. a teddy (laughs) to be honest she's so fluffy and really nice"* (153-154). Although this perception has some similarities with Elijah and Sophie in that they all found stroking the dog to be supportive of emotional regulation, Aurelia's perception seemed to contrast slightly due to her attributing her feeling of calmness to the dog's physical characteristic of being fluffy. This interlinked with the 'characteristics of school dogs' GET and 'physical appearance and features' subtheme, as well as the 'emotional attachment' GET and 'transitional object' subtheme.

Positive self-perception

'Positive self-perception' is a subtheme which was interpreted as an important component for some participants' experience of 'feeling good.' This appeared to be a shared experience for five out of the seven participants. They often seemed to compare their perceptions of themselves before they met the school dog to now. Positive self-perception was interpreted to mean how participants viewed and felt about themselves. For these participants, this appeared to be related to social confidence and feelings of accomplishment.

During Kyle's interview, he spoke about his experience of bullying at a different school where he seemed to feel that he did not have any friends. Kyle seemed to emphasise the

pivotal role he feels the school dog at his current school has had on his view of himself and his confidence in his abilities to make friends.

"my self-esteem has sky-rocketed and I have friends now. I did have a small group of friends in year 3 but that was it I only had a small group of friends" (228-229).

Kyle's use of metaphor here was interpreted to signify the stark contrast in how he views and feels about himself now compared to when he first started at this school. I wondered whether the use of this metaphor meant that this new social identity felt very alien to him, and he couldn't quite believe the difference. Kyle also went on to describe what was interpreted as self-compassion where there was a sense that he can notice his strengths and accept himself for who he is ***"****If you're feeling more mentally stable then you can feel better about yourself. You don't beat yourself up as much"* (Kyle, 165-166).

Similarly to Kyle, it was interpreted that Daisy experienced a more positive perception of herself socially as a result of the school dogs, although Daisy seemed to express this more subtly than Kyle. Daisy was asked how playtime would be different for her if there were no school dogs and she answered, *"I'd just be sitting down on the bench or somewhere and just being quiet*" (214). There was a sense of a shifted identity for Daisy here in that without the school dogs, she feels she would not be attempting to interact with her peers, as perhaps she doesn't believe that anyone wants to play with her. This seems to link with the 'sense of belonging' GET where Daisy talked about interacting with the dogs as a shared experience with friends, therefore supporting this interpretation that it has helped her to view herself differently, as more socially desired.

For both Aurelia and Amber, there was a sense of feeling accomplished and proud of themselves for their interactions with the dogs, but for contrasting reasons. For Aurelia, interacting with a dog seemed not to be something she was used to or felt particularly confident to do initially, but meeting the school dog helped her to overcome a fear of dogs e.g., *"feel proud of myself and her because usually I would also be running away from dogs"* (477-478). There was a sense that interacting with the dog helped her to prove to herself that she can face her fear of dogs, be brave, and to look back on her ability to overcome this and feel proud. For Amber on the other hand, it was interpreted that she felt proud of herself for

teaching the dog a trick, *"try teaching a bit new, tricks. Like what I taught Henry… I taught him to sit. Sometimes he chases me. He probably just wants a treat but still"* (95-96).

4.3.2 GET 2: Functioning well

'Functioning well' was also interpreted to be a salient theme for participants' perceptions of how school dogs affect their wellbeing. This seemed to refer to aspects of functioning such as the ability to cope with difficulties, think clearly, develop relationships, and make decisions. This GET seemed to be present across all participants' datasets suggesting it was an important shared experience for all. This was interpreted to be captured within the sub-themes *supportive of emotional regulation which improves engagement with school* and *supportive of developing relationships with others.*

There appears to be a link between the two GETs 'feeling good' and 'functioning well.' The following quote from Daisy seemed suggestive of the link between 'presence of positive emotions' and 'supportive of developing relationships with others' nicely, *"when you're happy and smiling, people smile back"* (148).

Supportive of emotional regulation which improves engagement with school

'Supportive of emotional regulation which improved engagement with school' was interpreted as a subtheme contributing to participants' experience of 'functioning well.' Emotional regulation in this context was interpreted as a process by which individuals control their emotional state. Engagement with school for participants seemed to include feeling able to attend school and being more able to concentrate on learning tasks. This appeared to be a shared experience for six out of the seven participants.

P: "For me, he's my emotional crutch."

R: "Ooh okay – describe what that means."

P: "Erm well (pause) I don't know how to explain what an emotional crutch is. It's like something that makes you feel emotionally stable when you are emotionally unstable." – Kyle (156-160)

To me, a physical crutch is an object that supports someone who is physically impaired to be more mobile and to go about their daily life. Kyle's interesting metaphor for the dog being an emotional crutch was interpreted to mean that for Kyle, the dog supports him to emotionally

regulate which helps him to be more able to engage with and get on with his school day. This interpretation was supported by further views from Kyle whereby he described feeling more able to concentrate in maths lessons, as well as other participants' perceptions that seemed to relate to being more able to concentrate e.g:

"and then there's the dogs, I'm just so happy and I've actually got my brain working. Whereas at home, I don't have any pets or any dogs, so it's just at home when I'm trying to draw something at night, it's just completely blank and I just can't think of anything" - Amber (284-287).

"my mind is switched on" – Sophie (189).

"I will probably just go to lessons normally and I won't protest to the teacher" – Elijah (176).

"when I'm upset, I can, you know, say hi to her for a few minutes and then get on with my day" – Aurelia (76-77).

Linked to this, Lara shared her experience of her parents separating and how she did not feel able to attend school and how the school dog supported her with her attendance:

"Ohh. If something's happened between friends or family. Sometimes when I walk in the class because when my mum and my dad split up, I... I did not want to leave the house cause I knew he [Dad] was leaving so I just… I had a bit of a fit (laughs) and I was just like grabbing onto the gates and I was just like 'no, don't take me.' But then Barney [school dog] came and he was like taking me into the office and we had some free time to play" - Lara (75-80).

Overall, there was a strong sense that feeling more able to engage with school was a significant experience for participants.

Supportive of developing relationships with others

'Supportive of developing relationships with others' was interpreted as a subtheme contributing to participants' experience of 'functioning well.' This appeared to be a shared experience for six out of the seven participants.

During Elijah's interview, he often referred to his experience of being with a staff member (the dog's owner) whenever he sees the school dog. "*Erm chat to [staff member], chat to [same staff member] usually (…) Erm chat to [staff member] about what's been happening, things that I'm annoyed about maybe and all the things that have upset me and*

all that stuff" (Elijah, 106, 110-111). This was interpreted to mean that the school dog being present helps Elijah to open up to this staff member, developing their relationship. Elijah was asked what he thinks this staff member thinks about the school dog and this was his response:

"Erm she definitely likes her as a pet, erm she definitely likes being a member of staff with a pet to help people. She likes to help people like me because I have anger issues and all that and struggle with being calm sometimes" - Elijah (191-194).

Elijah seemed to think this staff member enjoys helping him and this positive perception was interpreted to be indicative of a sense of trust and genuineness in their relationship.

Daisy's account suggested that the school dogs help her to develop her relationships with peers as she talked about her interactions with the school dogs as a shared experience with a small group of peers. *"Yeah **we** try and call Henry back but he never listens to **us**"* (Daisy, 73). Daisy's choice of the pronouns *"we"* and *"us"* here was interpreted to mean that she feels a sense of connection and belonging with this small group of peers due to this common experience, therefore supportive of developing peer relationships.

4.4 Research Question 2: What are children's perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing?

4.4.1 GET 3: Emotional Attachment

'Emotional attachment' was interpreted to be a salient theme for participants' perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing. This GET was also present across all participants' datasets suggesting it was an important shared experience for all and that it was a key perception of why school dogs affect their wellbeing. This is captured within the sub-themes: *emotional connection, sense of permanency and constancy,* and *transitional object providing comfort and security.*

Emotional connection

'Emotional connection' was interpreted as a subtheme contributing to participants' experience of 'emotional attachment.' This appeared to be a shared experience for all seven participants out of the seven participants suggesting it was an important shared experience for all.

"He's very sensitive about his paws and he doesn't like people touching them. I… I know from experience that I did try stroking him once and he can be a bit protective if you like, touch him and he can think you might be trying to… trying to harm him so he can nip.. attempts to nip sometimes, but other than that he's.. he's amazing. He knows the tricks sitting down... and… he's black" – Kyle (10-16)

Kyle's change of wording from, *"he can nip.. attempts to nip sometimes"* suggested Kyle felt too harsh in his descriptions of the school dog which was interpreted to mean that Kyle shows a strong sense of empathy with the dog, as you would for anyone you have an emotional connection with. This was corroborated by a further quote from Kyle which gave a sense of a reciprocal emotional connection with the dog, *"Knowing that there's someone who does love me. As they say dogs are man's best friends"* (181-182).

Linked to this, Sophie stated, *"if she [the school dog] sees a child that she's used to, she'll like run up to them and like surround them.. like she did earlier with me (laughs) but yeah"* (10-11). Sophie's use of the term *"used to"* was interpreted to mean that there has been enough time for her to become familiar with the school dog and for the school dog to become familiar with her which has allowed them to bond and form an emotional connection.

Aurelia described what was interpreted to be how an emotional connection with the school dog feels, "*well physically, it gives me a fluttery feeling in my chest.. in a good way.. it just makes me feel much better"* (491-492).

"I think it helps me because sometimes you just need someone to be there for you" (Lara, 349-350). This was interpreted as akin to the emotional connection you would experience with friends or family members, who provide a secure base.

Sense of permanency and constancy

'Sense of permanency and constancy' was interpreted as a subtheme that seemed to contribute to participants' experience of 'emotional attachment.' There was a sense that the school dogs still exist for the children even when they are not directly with them and that their emotional connection and secure base remains. This appeared to be a shared experience for five out of seven participants suggesting it was an important shared experience for most.

For Daisy, Lara, and Amber, it appeared that the school dogs have led to an awareness of the dogs' presence in their schools, where they often find themselves thinking about the dogs:

"Be thinking about the dogs" – Daisy (263)

"*Cause I know the next day he'll be around"* – Lara (112)

"because I always go down to see if they're there and just visit them" – Amber (279)

Lara's quote here was in response to her being asked why the school dog makes her feel happier. Her response was interpreted to have a sense of reassurance about the dog's presence and the future-oriented tone suggested a confidence that the dog will be there tomorrow as a secure base to support her. Similarly, Aurelia referred to being able to see the school dog throughout the school day, *"you can also spot her throughout the day being walked by either [staff member] or other students"* (57-58). This was interpreted to provide a sense of comfort for Aurelia as this served as a reminder that the dog is present and available for her to go to if she needed.

Kyle on the other hand, talked about the school dog's routine in relation to *"our"* school routine referring to the other children in school. ***"****Just after our break and our lunchtimes, he goes on a walk - a shorter walk after break and a longer walk after lunch or as we finish lunch (…) Barney is always there for people"* (Kyle, 26-27, 72). It was interpreted that the school dog being a part of the school routines and a part of the school community was an important perception for Kyle. Kyle describing the dog's routine in relation to his own gave a sense of familiarity suggesting that he is often thinking about where the dog is in school. This therefore supported the interpretation of Kyle experiencing a sense of permanency and constancy of the school dog, serving as a reminder of the secure base if needed.

Transitional object providing comfort and security

'Transitional object providing comfort and security' was interpreted as a subtheme contributing to participants' experience of 'emotional attachment.' A transitional object in this context was interpreted as a comfort 'object' representing their attachment figures at home whilst they are in school. This appeared to be a shared experience for six out of seven participants suggesting it was an important shared experience for most.

Lara was asked to describe what her experience of cuddling the school dog was like:

"It's like a warm embrace. That you would get from your parents but obviously they're not there at school with you so you can't do that. I would find it just a bit awkward if I went to hug a teacher because you know them but like they're not your family and I just feel like every animal could be your family. You could have a whole farm of animals and they could be all your family even if you didn't have anyone else" (216-221).

It was interpreted that Lara feels psychological and physical comfort and security from cuddling the school dog. She seemed to compare this to the comfort and security she receives from her parents and so it was interpreted that the dog serves as a replacement attachment figure for her whilst she is at school. There was a sense that Lara perceived this as a socially acceptable way of receiving this kind of support in school, whereas this would not be the case with a staff member in school.

Some participants appeared to liken the school dogs to objects that are more typically viewed as transitional objects such as teddies e.g:

*"It makes me feel calm, comforted because it's like.. a teddy (laughs) to be honest she's so fluffy and really nice" – Aurelia (*153-154).

"'cause I've got a teddy at home that when I feel wound up I just start squeezing it and erm then it's fluffy too. So when I feel that fluff, I know I can calm down and it's exactly like the teddy that I have at home, so I pretend that Henry is my teddy and I just hug him and all that" – Amber (395-399).

Sophie shared, *"whenever I go see a dog it like... it feels like I have something with me... because we're not allowed to bring like stuff into school, so I feel like if [school dog] is there... then it feels like I've brought something in that calms me down"* (Sophie, 150-152). This was interpreted that for Sophie, the school dog serves as a transitional object that provides comfort and security for her in school.

Other participants referred to cuddling the school dog which was also interpreted to mean providing comfort and security e.g:

"I'd just cuddle her and give her a bit of a stroke, it just helps me to calm down and regulate" – Elijah (164-165).

"Ohh, erm whenever I see them, they always make you feel happy because they like cuddle up to me, Henry always jumps up to me" – Daisy (232-233).

4.4.2 GET 4: Sense of Belonging

'Sense of belonging' was also interpreted to be a salient theme for participants' perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing. In this context, this seemed to refer to the feeling of fitting in and being accepted by others, as well as a sense of being needed or desired by others and a resulting sense of purpose. This GET appeared to be present across four out of the seven participants' datasets suggesting that this was a shared experience for some but not for all. There were no subthemes.

Kyle described his experience of playing tug of war with the school dog:

'P: "*Erm just stroke him, and play tug of war*" (pause)

R: *"Okay. And what's that like?"*

P: "*Nice. It makes me feel like I have a place in this world, but not many people do have a place*"' – Kyle (121-124).

Kyle's description was interpreted to mean that playing tug of war is an enjoyable experience for both him and the school dog. Tug of war is a game which requires at least two players and so Kyle and the school dog needed each other to have this enjoyable experience. There was a sense of acceptance between Kyle and the school dog as they happily played the game with each other which was interpreted to lead to a sense of 'being needed' and 'fitting in' for Kyle where he has a *"place in this world."* Kyle seemed to perceive that not many people fit in which was interpreted as a pessimistic view, therefore highlighting the possible significance and importance of this experience for him.

In contrast with Kyle's experience, it was interpreted that for Daisy and Amber, spending time with the school dogs facilitated a sense of belonging amongst a small peer group (which happened to be each other).

'P: *"I feel like he's always annoying us."*

R: *"Yeah. And when you said us, who else is with you?"*

P: *"One of my friends. She has nothing to do either"* - Daisy (107-109).

"They both love Henry. And erm I'm pretty sure that.. I don't know what they're really feeling of thinking or something like that. I just know they both love [the school dog] and also like to stay with me too. They're like well.. I'd say they like dogs just like me" – Amber (247-249).

For both Daisy and Amber, there appeared to be a shared interest in the dogs and shared purpose for why they spent time with the dogs. This was interpreted to mean there is a sense of commonality and therefore acceptance between peers which contributed to a sense of belonging. This was supported by the prevalence of Daisy's use of the pronoun *"we"* throughout her transcript e.g, *"We ask if we can go see them"* (Daisy, 37).

4.4.3 GET 5: Characteristics of School Dogs

'Characteristics of school dogs' was interpreted to be a salient theme for participants' perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing. This GET appeared to be present across all participants' datasets suggesting it was an important shared perception for all. This seemed to be captured within the sub-themes: *free from human complexities* and *physical appearance and features.*

<u>Free from human complexities</u>

'Free from human complexities' was interpreted as a subtheme contributing to participants' perceptions of 'characteristics of school dogs.' This appeared to be a shared perception for six out of seven participants suggesting it was an important shared experience for most.

Amber appeared to speak about the simplistic actions of the dog leading to a big impact on her feeling calm,

"I was just laying down in the grass.. erm it was a very sunny day once it was really hot especially because he's [the school dog] black and he absorbs heat. We stayed in the shade. I put my jumper down and just laid down. ***And all he did is just*** *come on top of me like, putting his head on my chest and all and he was just* ***really calm****"* (Amber 126-130).

Contrastingly, Lara appeared to perceive that the simplicity of the dog was linked to the dog's ability to listen and inability to talk, ***"****I think it's because they can't say anything that might upset you. They can just listen. Then just make me feel happier"* (Lara, 295-296). This was interpreted to mean that in Lara's experience, when people have listened to her, they

have said things in response that have upset her, but the dog simply listens to her which helps her to feel better.

Elijah seemed to perceive the simplicity of the dog through observing the dog's actions and how she [the dog] follows her desires in an overt way without holding back, *"cause she's always looking up at [staff member] to see if she has a treat in her hand and she's like ooh I want that" (laughs)* (Elijah, 133-134). This seems to link with Daisy's possible perception of the dog overtly showing that he is excited about seemingly ordinary objects, ***"H****enry [school dog] is always playful, he loves getting sticks, big sticks"* (Daisy, 42).

Physical appearance and features

'Physical appearance and features' was interpreted as a subtheme that appeared to contribute to participants' perceptions of 'characteristics of school dogs.' This seemed to be a shared perception for four out of seven participants suggesting it was a shared experience for some. The physical appearance and features the participants seemed to refer to the dogs' facial features and ears.

Kyle referred to the school dog's ears being imperfect which is what he seemed to perceive as supportive of his wellbeing, ***"****Erm well (pause) his ears. His ears are just too big (laughs). I think that's it. His ears make him the perfect school dog"* (Kyle, 323-324). Kyle later went on to describe why he feels this helps him, *"it helps me to know that there are other people in this world that are different"* (326-327). For Kyle, the dog's imperfections seemed to serve as a visual reminder that there's other people who are different – interestingly, this was interpreted that Kyle felt a sense of commonality with others which may link to the sense of belonging GET.

Both Lara and Elijah referred to their school dogs' faces:

"*He's got brown eyes, and a big wet nose (laughs) and a very smiley face"* (Lara, 16-17).

"She's got a round face erm she gives big hugs" (Elijah, 26).

The presence of laughter for Lara and linking the dog's face to their affectionate nature for Elijah was interpreted to mean that the dogs' physical features invoke positive emotions.

In contrast, Aurelia seemed to perceive the dog's fur to be a feature that helps her to emotionally regulate, *"erm (laughs) I don't know if this sounds weird, but like the texture of her fur and she's when she licks me, she likes licking a lot, actually"* (Aurelia, 180-181).

4.4.4 GET 6: Nature of Interactions with School Dogs

'Nature of interactions with school dogs' was interpreted to be a salient theme for participants' perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing. This GET seemed to be present across all participants' datasets suggesting it was an important shared experience for all. This appeared to be captured within the sub-themes: *lack of pressure, acceptance, emotionally attuned and responsive*, and *how the school utilises the dog.*

Lack of pressure

'Lack of pressure' was a sub-theme within 'nature of interactions with school dogs' interpreted to contribute to participants' perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing. This was interpreted to be present in four out of seven of the participants' accounts suggesting a shared perception for some.

For all of these four participants, their use of language was interpreted to suggest their perception of a lack of pressure when interacting with the school dogs:

*"he's **just** lovely to see"* – Kyle (19).

***"**I can **just** hear him breathing. It's calming to hear him"* – Lara (237).

*"You can run with her. You can play fetch with her. You can **just** play with her in general with toys and stuff and yeah, you can give her belly rubs she likes them a lot and yeah"* – Aurelia (41-43).

These participants' use of *"just"* was interpreted as they don't have any external pressures or demands placed on them when with the school dogs and that they do not feel they are required to do anything taxing which they felt supports their wellbeing.

Amber's account seemed to give a sense of autonomy in that she *"decided"* to take the dog out:

*"so I kind of fell in love with Henry 'cause he was really energetic like me so **I decided to** take him out*." (Amber, 14-15)

This was interpreted to mean that she experiences a lack of pressure and sense of autonomy where others are not telling her what to do or where there are rules that she must follow.

Acceptance

'Acceptance' was a sub-theme within 'nature of interactions with school dogs' interpreted to contribute to participants' perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing. This was interpreted to be present in six out of seven of the participants' accounts suggesting an important shared perception for most.

Linked to the subtheme of lack of pressure, Aurelia described why she feels the school dog supports her:

"You don't really feel the pressure of acting as someone else who you actually aren't. You don't feel all the lies and stuff because I would tell a few lies to you know impress which is not really that great but" – Aurelia (611-613).

This was interpreted to mean that Aurelia feels a sense of freedom when she is with the dog that she does not generally experience in school. There was a sense that she felt some shame having to be someone else in school, but she feels she can be her true self with the dog and doesn't have to *"act,"* suggesting she feels the dog accepts her for her true self.

There seemed to be a similar sense in Elijah, Amber, and Daisy's accounts of the dog liking them and showing this by jumping up on them:

"Yeah she usually jumps up at me sometimes" – Elijah (116).

"So.. and he always comes up" – Amber (410).

"Erm like he always likes me" – Daisy (237).

Amber and Daisy's certainty e.g. *"always"* suggested a sense of unconditional positive regard for them in that if the dog always likes them and jumps up on them no matter what.

Emotionally attuned and responsive

'Emotionally attuned and responsive' was a sub-theme with 'nature of interactions with school dogs.' This was interpreted to be present in five out of seven of the participants' accounts.

Some participants appeared to perceive that the dog is able to sense how they are feeling:

'R: "*Ahh right. And I think you said he's perfect emotionally – what do you mean by that?"*

P: "*I mean that if you are feeling sad he can sense it."*

R: "*and what do you mean by he can sense it?"*

P: "*he's a dog you know. Dog.. dog.. dogs… the senses of a dog.. for example their noses are much stronger than a human nose and I think he might be able to pick up something in the air if you know what I mean. Because most animals can detect an earthquake, a hurricane, or a thunderstorm just by.. just by.. feeling the air pressure"' – Kyle (*328-335).

For Kyle, this was interpreted that the dog is emotionally attuned to how he is feeling. This is similar across other participants' accounts too. For Lara and Aurelia, there was an additional sense that the school dogs want to support them to feel better and seem to know exactly what to do in response to them:

"*He runs to the door and he immediately knows what I'm feeling, why I'm feeling that and he he really wants to cheer me up. He wags his tail, he keeps like, looking at me with this great big smile on his face. He's beaming and then he grabs whatever he can find, brings it to me and so he can just have that time to be happy and play"* - Lara (375-378).

"Well, she can tell.. sometimes when I'm at my lowest or I'm crying, she could really sense that I'm upset.. like.. she will put her paws on me or cuddle on me.. (laughs) Go on me to show me that it's OK and that's kind of comforting" – Aurelia (66-68).

<u>How the school utilises the dog</u>

'How the school utilises the dog' was a sub-theme within 'nature of interactions with school dogs' interpreted to contribute to participants' perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing. This was interpreted to be present in four out of seven of the participants' accounts. Participants seemed to perceive that a sense of autonomy in visiting the dog and the dog being a 'meet and greet' upon arrival to school supported their wellbeing.

For some participants, a key part of their experience appeared to be that they go and see the dog (as opposed to the dog going to see them). Autonomy to visit the dog was

interpreted to be a key experience relating to participants' perceptions on why the school dogs affect their wellbeing. Kyle referred to him going to see the dog at naturally occurring transitions throughout the school day, "*I generally see him most, when I'm going to or coming back from the toilet or when I come in from break or just before we go home"* (61-63). This was interpreted to mean that Kyle has the autonomy to decide when he feels the need to visit the dog and that these transitions may form natural breaks to the school demands. Similarly, Sophie talked about a time-out card she had been given at school which was specifically to request a break to see the school dog. It was interpreted that this card gave Sophie a sense of autonomy where she could request a break by simply showing it to her teacher, and not requiring her to do this verbally e.g.*"erm so what I do is.. if I'm feeling angry.. so since it has a lanyard around it.. I put it on me and then I show the teacher it and then they'll say yeah ok go on then you can go and see Moose [the school dog]"* (70-72).

A sense of tension was interpreted in Sophie's account of using this time-out card, where there seemed to be a barrier limiting her sense of autonomy. She described an experience where a teacher did not allow her to see the dog when she requested e.g:

"So, I was going to ask if I could have a drink, but she was like go and sit back down why are you getting up? But that made me angry because she was like shouting at me and stuff like that. So, I went to my drawer and got my Moose card, and I was going to show it to a different teacher but [staff member] saw and said do you wanna play that game? And she sent me to the quiet room" (125-130).

As well as going to see the dog, Lara shared her experiences of the dog going to see her. Lara shared some emotional challenges she had faced with her home life such as parental separation and described not feeling able to come into school at times. She described how the school dog was a 'meet and greet' for her upon arrival to school and she seemed to perceive that this helped her to feel more able to go to class.

"*sometimes when I come into school, he's at the gate waiting, and he also sometimes, if I come to school a bit upset, he will sometimes follow me into the class and then he's taken out when I'm settled in"* - Lara (22-25).

4.4.5 GET 7: Changes in Thoughts

'Changes in thoughts' was also interpreted to be a salient theme for participants' perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing. This GET was present across four out of the seven participants' datasets suggesting that this was a shared experience for some but not for all. For these participants, changes in thoughts seemed to refer to escapism, distraction, and being more mindful. There were no subthemes.

For some participants, there was a sense that schools dogs helped them to be more able to focus on the 'here and now.' Lara was asked how she feels when she strokes the school dog, *"It feels like I'm on a cloud just me and him drifting away out into the horizon"* (241). Lara's interesting use of a simile here was interpreted to mean that for her, it feels like a form of escape, where the physical environment as well as all negative thoughts and feelings *"drifting away,"* bearing no weight for Lara where she can be in the 'here and now.' There appeared to be some similarities in Elijah's experience where his negative thoughts seem to disappear in the presence of the school dog and all he can think about are positive ones e.g, *"I don't think about my anger when I'm with Ruby I just think about the happy memories"* (220-221).

For Aurelia, there was a sense that the school dog helps to distract her from negative thoughts and feelings due to the responsibility she felt she needed to have when looking after a staff member's dog,

"well with [school dog], you need to be responsible for a lot of things. Like the things I said and just keeping her safe because it's [staff member's] dog – I don't want her to get hurt" – Aurelia (404-406).

There was a sense of mindfulness for Kyle, where instead of shutting other thoughts out, the school dog helped him to be more aware of his thoughts. Kyle was asked what he is thinking about when he strokes the dog – *"I don't know what I'm thinking. I could tell you what I'm thinking if Barney was here right now"* – Kyle (255-256).

This appears to interlink with the 'feeling good' GET and 'absence of negative emotions' subtheme.

4.10 Summary of Findings

Two GETs were interpreted to answer to the first research question (RQ1) 'What are children's perceptions of how school dogs affect their wellbeing?' These were *feeling good* and *functioning well.* There were five GETs interpreted in answering the second research question (RQ2) 'What are children's perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing?' These were *emotional attachment, sense of belonging, characteristics of the school dogs, nature of interactions with school dogs,* and *changes in thoughts.* As depicted in this section, there seemed to be some similarities across participants' experiences, but meaning was often attributed in unique ways when considering the wider context and accounts from participants. These findings will now be discussed in relation to psychological theories and previous research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Overview of Discussion

This chapter focuses on making sense of the interpretations of children's experiences of school dogs supporting their wellbeing. The themes presented in Chapter 4 are discussed in relation to psychological theory and previous research findings to answer the research questions. Limitations of the study are acknowledged and implications for school and EP practice, as well as future research are suggested.

5.2 Summary of Research

This research aimed to explore how children make sense of their views and experiences of school dogs supporting their wellbeing. It sought to contribute to the research literature on school dogs supporting wellbeing by taking an in-depth view of children's lived experience. The research aimed to answer two research questions. The first research question was 'What are children's perceptions of how school dogs affect their wellbeing?' This was answered with the two group experiential themes *feeling good* and *functioning well.* The second research question was 'What are children's perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing?' This was answered with the five group experiential themes *emotional attachment, sense of belonging, characteristics of the school dogs, nature of interactions with school dogs,* and *changes in thoughts.* Despite participants' experiences appearing to have some similarities, meaning was attributed to their experiences in different ways. The findings will now be discussed in relation to relevant theory and research.

5.3 Interpretations in Relation to Existing Theory and Research for Research Question 1

Research Question 1: What are children's perceptions of how school dogs affect their wellbeing?

5.3.1 Feeling Good

Feeling good was interpreted to be of key importance in children's experiences of school dogs supporting their wellbeing. This appears to be in-line with the concept of hedonic wellbeing within the literature (Huppert & So, 2011; Wright & Cropanzano, 2004). All participants seemed to perceive the school dogs supported them to feel good. This finding was somewhat unsurprising as this is in-line with previous research (Barber & Proops, 2019;

Bruneau et al., 2023; Henderson et al. 2020; Pinto & Foulkes, 2015; Sorin et al., 2015; Steel, 2022; Syrnyk et al., 2022; Zents et al., 2017). This finding suggests that according to children, school dogs can be an effective way of improving children's hedonic wellbeing.

Presence of positive emotions

The children in this study appeared to perceive the presence of positive emotions as how their hedonic wellbeing is affected by school dogs. This seems congruent with the findings of many studies in the reviewed literature (Barber & Proops, 2019; Bruneau et al., 2023; Henderson et al., 2020; Pinto & Foulkes, 2015; Steel, 2022; Syrnyk et al., 2022). This also appears to link with Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of wellbeing where 'positive experiences' are thought to contribute towards wellbeing.

The current findings suggest that not only did children seem to perceive the presence of positive emotions, but they seemed to perceive a consistent and predictable presence of positive emotions, where there was a sense of confidence for the children that seeing the school dogs leads to positive emotions. Interestingly, this is not a finding that is present within the reviewed literature and the current study therefore adds detail and insight into children's experiences that was not previously understood. This could be linked with research highlighting the importance of the consistency of school emotional support in supporting children's wellbeing (Curby et al., 2013).

Absence of negative emotions

Children appeared to perceive that the absence of negative emotions was a key experience for how their hedonic wellbeing is affected by school dogs. This is in-line with findings from two of the reviewed studies (Barber & Proops, 2019; Zents et al., 2017). In-line with Zents et al.'s (2017) study, Lara and Daisy seemed to perceive that their feeling of sadness reduced when seeing the school dogs. Similarly, in-line with both Barber and Proops (2019) and Zents et al.'s (2017) studies, Lara and Aurelia in the current study seemed to perceive that their feelings of anxiety and worry reduced. The current study provides further insight into the nature of the worries that reduced however, as Lara described her worries related to challenging family circumstances such as parental separation and Aurelia described feeling overwhelmed by many emotions at once. The current study therefore enhances understanding gained from Barber and Proops (2019) and Zents et al.'s (2017) studies. These

findings appear to interlink with the 'nature of interactions with school dogs' GET whereby the dogs were perceived to be 'emotionally attuned and responsive' and contained perceived negative emotions.

In contrast with the reviewed literature, Elijah in the current study seemed to perceive the absence of anger from seeing the school dog. This finding was not present within the reviewed literature but appears to resonate with an older study by Anderson and Olson (2006) who found that a school dog was perceived by parents and children to serve as a distraction from children's anger and therefore reduced anger in the classroom. This was for a sample of children with 'severe emotional disorders.' The current study therefore supports Anderson and Olson's (2006) finding, adding further insight and detail to children's perceptions of how school dogs affect their hedonic wellbeing.

Supportive of emotional regulation which leads to a calm state

Children appeared to perceive that school dogs were supportive of emotional regulation which leads to a calm state. This seemed to be a key experience for how their hedonic wellbeing is affected by school dogs. School dogs affecting children to feel calm is in-line with findings from the reviewed literature (Barber & Proops, 2019; Pinto & Foulkes, 2015; Syrnyk et al., 2022; Zents et al., 2017), therefore supporting this finding for how school dogs affect hedonic wellbeing. The current study took a deeper dive into understanding children's lived experiences of this however and interpreted the dogs were supportive of emotional regulation which led to the calm state. This appears to interlink with the 'nature of interactions with school dogs' GET whereby the dogs were perceived to be 'emotionally attuned and responsive.' The children often referred to how the dog will let them stroke their fur and there was a sense that the children perceived that the dogs seem to know that this will help them to feel better. This perceived improvement in hedonic wellbeing could be explained by research linking engaging in rhythmic movement and emotional regulation (Williams, 2018).

Positive self-perception

Positive self-perception was also interpreted to be an important experience contributing to the children's hedonic wellbeing. This related to children's possible perceptions of sense of accomplishment and increased social confidence. This finding appears

to be partly in-line with some of the findings from the reviewed research (Henderson et al., 2020; Sorin et al., 2015; Zents et al., 2017). Henderson et al. (2020) and Sorin et al. (2015) both found that children perceived their confidence around learning and reading increase. The current study did find that children seemed to perceive they felt more able to engage with their learning, but this was interpreted to be more closely linked with eudaimonic wellbeing rather than hedonic wellbeing, and so this is explored and presented within the 'functioning well' GET.

Zents et al. (2017) found that children's perceptions were that their confidence in general increased. This was not explored any further by Zents et al. (2017) and there were no examples of what participants perceived as important about their experience. In the current study, both Kyle and Daisy appeared to perceive an increased social confidence from seeing the school dogs where they felt more able to interact with peers and make friends. Further insight was shared such as Kyle describing his experience of being bullied at school and how this seemed to not be the case anymore and that the school dog seems to have been a huge part of him feeling more able to accept himself for who he is. These findings in the current study therefore add experiential detail to previous surface-level findings.

Both Aurelia and Amber in the current study appeared to perceive a sense of accomplishment for different reasons. Aurelia seemed to describe feeling proud of herself for not getting scared of the school dog. Amber on the other hand, seemed to describe a sense of proudness for teaching the school dog tricks. Some of the reviewed literature found a link between the school dogs and children's sense of themselves as learners (Henderson et al., 2020; Sorin et al., 2015), but there does not appear to be existing research linking school dogs with children's sense of accomplishment more broadly which is therefore a novel finding. Both children's possible perceptions of accomplishment could be explained using Seligman's (2011) PERMA model – the 'A' representing 'accomplishment,' and therefore being a key component to one's experience of wellbeing.

5.3.2 Functioning Well

Functioning well was interpreted to be of key importance in children's experiences of school dogs supporting their wellbeing. This appears to be in-line with the concept of eudaimonic wellbeing within the literature (Huppert & So, 2011; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). All

participants spoke about how they seem to perceive the school dogs supporting them to function well. In the reviewed literature, the evidence for DAIs supporting children's eudaimonic wellbeing was less clear (than for hedonic wellbeing), as only half of the studies within the SLR found a link (Henderson et al., 2020; Pinto & Foulkes, 2015; Steel, 2022; Syrnyk et al., 2022). The current findings therefore provide evidence to support that DAIs are an appropriate intervention to support children with their eudaimonic wellbeing.

Supportive of emotional regulation which improves engagement with school

It was interpreted that children perceived the school dogs to be supportive of emotional regulation which improved their engagement with school. This seemed to be a key experience for how children's eudaimonic wellbeing is affected by school dogs. This has some alignment with the reviewed research such as Henderson et al. (2020) and Syrnyk et al. (2022) who found that children perceived their reading achievement improved, and Steel (2022) found that children perceived a school dog to help them to think clearly.

Most of the children in the current study (Kyle, Amber, Sophie, Elijah, & Aurelia) appeared to perceive that school dogs supported their ability to concentrate in school. This therefore seemed in-line with Steel (2022). This finding may be explained by the bi-directional link between hedonia and eudaimonia, or in other words, when the children were feeling emotionally regulated, they were more able to concentrate on learning activities (Huta & Ryan, 2010).

Lara in the current study seemed to perceive that the school dog helped her to feel more able to attend school when she was experiencing a challenging time with her parents separating. This appears to link with one of the reviewed studies – Zents et al. (2017) found that children perceived school dogs to improve their school attendance. This study was conducted in the US and so the present study supports this finding within the UK. This finding may be explained by Seligman's (2011) PERMA model – the E representing engagement (with school) as crucial for experiencing eudaimonic wellbeing.

Supportive of developing relationships with others

It was interpreted that children perceived the school dogs to be supportive of developing relationships with others. This therefore seemed to be a key experience for how

their eudaimonic wellbeing is affected by school dogs. This is in-line with four of the reviewed studies from the SLR (Henderson et al., 2020; Pinto & Foulkes, 2015; Sorin et al., 2015; Zents et al., 2017), therefore adding weight to this link.

It was interpreted that Elijah in the current study perceived that the school dog helped him to develop his relationship with a staff member at school where he felt more able to open up and talk about what was going on for him. This seems in-line with findings from Sorin et al. (2015), who found that children perceived that they got to know their teacher better as a result of the school dog. However, Sorin et al. (2015) did not explore this experience any further, whereas the current study provided some additional insight into possible children's perceptions of how the school dog affected eudaimonic wellbeing. Elijah appeared to perceive that this staff member enjoys helping students by bringing her dog into school, which was interpreted to mean that Elijah experiences a sense of genuineness in his relationship with this staff member. This may be explained by the 'congruence' component within Rogers' (1989) core conditions model and therefore offers an explanation of why Elijah may perceive the school dog to affect his wellbeing.

Daisy in the current study seemed to perceive that the school dogs improved her relationships with peers. Surprisingly, improvements with peer relationships was not a finding present within the reviewed literature, however this was present in the teachers' perceptions part of Sorin et al.'s (2015) study. This is corroborated by a quantitative study by Kang and Kim (2021) who found improved peer relationships in an elementary school following a DAI. These findings may be explained by Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of wellbeing – R representing relationships as crucial for eudaimonic wellbeing.

Previous research highlights that focusing on relationships between individuals within school (e.g. a relational approach) can lead to many positive outcomes including enhanced sense of belonging to school (Quin, 2017), improved wellbeing (McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010) and increased academic attainment (McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010). The insight into the children's experience in the present study suggests that the dog was perceived to have a key role in schools' relational approaches.

5.4 Interpretations in Relation to Existing Theory and Research for Research Question 2

Research Question 2: What are children's perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing?

5.4.1 Emotional Attachment

Emotional attachment was interpreted to be of key importance in children's perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing. There was limited and dated evidence of this within the reviewed literature (Allen et al., 1991; Levinson, 1969; Triebenbacher, 1998), and is a key aspect of Geist's (2011) theoretical framework of AAIs, and so this finding was somewhat expected. However, the interpreted prevalence of this GET throughout children's accounts suggests that this experience was of key importance, and so the limited previous research into this seems surprising. Indeed, emotional attachment was not interpreted from the reviewed studies in the SLR. The current study therefore provides a deeper insight into children's experience of this adding to the research evidence.

Emotional connection

It was interpreted that children perceived that they had an emotional connection with the school dogs which seemed a key experience for why their wellbeing is affected by school dogs. This appears to resonate with Triebenbacher's (1998) findings who found that children perceived pet dogs to be important family members, special friends, and providers of affection and emotional support. The current study's findings extend these findings to DAIs in schools as well as offering further insight into the lived experience of this.

For example, it was interpreted that Sophie in the current study perceived an emotional connection with the school dog where she talked about the dog running up to her because she knows her. This familiarity between school dog and children had not been interpreted from the reviewed literature and so is a novel finding. This may interlink with the sense of belonging GET.

It was interpreted that Kyle in the current study perceived having a sense of empathy with the school dog, which was therefore indicative of an emotional connection between them. Allen et al. (1991) found that children perceived school dogs to show empathy with them, and so the current study potentially suggests that there is reciprocal empathy between

school dogs and children. This is corroborated within the nature of interactions with school dogs GET. This may link with Rogers' (1989) core conditions theory where empathy is a key aspect to a therapist's demeanour.

Transitional object providing comfort and security

It was interpreted that children perceived school dogs as transitional objects providing comfort and security which seemed a key perception of why school dogs affect their wellbeing. This is in-line with Levinson's (1969) early work where children having therapy felt a sense of safety and security with a dog present. This was not a finding present within the SLR studies, however. The current research therefore supports Levinson's (1969) finding as relevant to the present day and within a UK school context.

Several of the children in the current study seemed to describe how cuddling the school dog helps them and some children compared the school dog to a teddy that they have at home. This was interpreted to mean that the dogs serve as transitional objects, representing their attachment figures, comfort, and security they receive at home. This was not a finding that was present within the reviewed literature, but this may link with Hawkins and Williams' (2017) research on pets who state, *"Pets can facilitate the development of human attachment relationships and can act as another attachment figure in the absence or disruption of human attachment relationships, such as parental divorce" (p. 2).* Interestingly, Hawkins and Williams (2017) found that children had higher attachment scores with pet dogs and cats than they did with other pets such as fish, birds, and reptiles. Perhaps for the children in the present study then, their reference to cuddling the school dogs is linked to their fur and that this serves as a reminder of the physical comfort from their caregivers at home. This is therefore an interpretation of these children's perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing.

Furthermore, it was interpreted that Lara in the current study perceived that receiving physical comfort in school from a member of staff was not socially appropriate, whereas it was [socially appropriate] with the school dog. This is not a finding present within previous research and so this adds insight into how children make sense of their experiences of school dogs supporting their wellbeing.

Sense of permanency and constancy

It was interpreted that children perceived school dogs to provide a sense of permanency and constancy which serves as a reminder of the 'secure base' (Bowlby, 1969). Permanency refers to the dog existing even when the children are not directly interacting with them, whilst constancy refers to the emotional connection remaining constant even when physically absent or at times of conflict (Bomber, 2007). Children in the current study often talked about the dogs in relation to their school day and how seeing the dog throughout the day was a reminder of their [the dogs'] existence and how their emotional connection remains even when not directly interacting with the dog. This seems an important perception as Ward et al. (2009) found that when children in care had multiple placements and permanency was not developed, children's wellbeing was lowered. This was therefore interpreted to be a key perception for why children feel school dogs affect their wellbeing.

This sub-theme offers a novel interpretation of children's experiences with school dogs as this is not present in previous literature. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy could help to understand this finding for children's perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing as 'love/belonging' is a key factor for eudaimonic wellbeing according to Maslow (1943).

5.4.2 Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging was interpreted to be of importance in children's perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing. This finding was consistent with Pinto and Foulkes' (2015) findings, therefore supporting that school dogs can foster a sense of belonging for children. This is important to note as considerable research suggests that a sense of belonging for children within school is integral to positive outcomes including higher attainment (Hughes et al., 2015) and increased motivation and engagement (Neel & Fuligni, 2013). Maslow's (1943) hierarchy supports a deeper understanding of the importance of this finding as this model suggests that love/belonging is a fundamental human need in order to achieve self-actualisation.

In-line with Pinto and Foulkes (2015), the present study found that children appeared to perceive a sense of belonging with the school dogs themselves (Kyle) as well as a sense of belonging with peers as a result of seeing the school dogs with their peers (Amber & Daisy). The present study adds to Pinto and Foulkes' (2015) findings, as detail and insight into the

lived experiences of children are uncovered. For example, when Kyle described his experience of playing tug of war with the school dog, it was interpreted that this gave him a sense of fitting in and that he was desired by the dog in order for them to have this fun game. It was also interpreted that Daisy and Amber perceived a sense of commonality with peers as a result of looking after the dogs in school which gave them both a sense of belonging and being accepted by these peers.

5.4.3 Characteristics of School Dogs

Characteristics of school dogs was interpreted to be of importance in children's perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing. In the present study, it was interpreted that children perceived the dogs as free from human complexities (e.g. overt display of emotions and not being able to speak), as well as the dogs' physical appearance and features (e.g. having a "cute" face, having physical imperfections, and being furry) that supported their wellbeing. This finding was consistent with two of the studies from the SLR (Barber & Proops, 2019; Syrnyk et al., 2022), therefore adding weight to the notion that school dog characteristics support children's wellbeing.

Free from human complexities

Both Barber and Proops (2019) and Syrnyk et al. (2022) found that children perceived the characteristics of the school dogs to be supportive of their wellbeing such as the dogs being good at listening. This seems consistent with Lara's possible perceptions in the present study, where she described the dog's ability to listen to her worries supports her wellbeing. The present study adds deeper insight into this, as Lara added what seemed to be her perceptions around the dog's inability to speak and to possibly say something hurtful or judgemental like another human might do is why she perceives the school dog to support her wellbeing. This was interpreted to be more specific than just the dog's behaviours, meaning that it is the dog being free from the complexities of humans that children seem to perceive as why school dogs support their wellbeing. This appears to be in-line with Friesen's (2010) research who found that children perceived interactions with dogs were free from human complexities.

It was interpreted that for Elijah and Daisy, the school dogs' overt display of their feelings and desires (e.g. looking for treats and finding sticks) were how the dogs were free

from human complexities. It was interpreted that these children perceived a simplicity and clarity regarding the dogs' behaviours which led to a sense of reassurance as the dog seemed genuine. Both of these interpretations of free from human complexities resonate with Rogers' (1989) core conditions theory, where 'congruence' is argued to be key in a therapist's demeanour. This may also resonate with 'competence' in Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory; the children in this study appeared to perceive the dog as free from human complexities and could have therefore experienced some competence in their ability to understand how the dog may be feeling and thinking. These links with theory help us to understand children's possible perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing.

Physical appearance and features

Children in the present study appeared to perceive that the school dogs' physical appearance and features were a factor for why school dogs affect their wellbeing. This aligns with Barber and Proops (2019) who found that children perceived school dogs' physical appearance as supportive of wellbeing. Barber and Proops' (2019) findings were due to participants describing the dog's face as "cute" and there was no further detail or interpretation offered of the potential meaning of this. The present study provides deeper insight into children's perceptions of this. It was interpreted that Kyle perceived the school dog's physical imperfections as a visual reminder that he [Kyle] is not the only one who is different. This seems to interlink with the sense of belonging GET and links with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy (belonging). In contrast, Aurelia seemed to perceive that the tactile experience of stroking the dog's fur was supportive of feeling emotionally regulated which is not a finding detailed within the SLR studies. This seems to link with the emotional attachment GET. This therefore offers a deeper insight into children's experiences of school dogs supporting their wellbeing than previous research.

5.4.4 Nature of Interactions with School dogs

Nature of interactions with school dogs was interpreted to be of key importance in children's perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing. This finding was consistent with some findings from the SLR studies (e.g. activities with the dog, characteristics of the dog). In the present study, children seemed to perceive the interactions with the school dogs to have a lack of pressure, a sense of acceptance, and be emotionally attuned and responsive.

Children also seemed to perceive that how their school utilised the dog affected their wellbeing. There is some consistency here with the reviewed previous research (Barber & Proops, 2019; Syrnyk et al., 2022), however the present study offers a deeper insight than previous findings into children's lived experiences of school dogs supporting their wellbeing.

Lack of pressure

It was interpreted that children in the present study perceived that there was a lack of pressure in their interactions with the school dogs which was a key perception for why they felt that school dogs affect their wellbeing. This does not seem to align with findings from the reviewed literature and so is therefore a novel finding to further understanding. There does not appear to be any previous research linking the impact of lack of pressure on wellbeing, however, Steare et al. (2023) recently conducted a SLR who found a possible link between increased academic pressure and decreased mental health for school age children. This finding may also link with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) where autonomy is a key psychological need to be supported to lead to higher wellbeing; by feeling a lack of pressure in their interactions with the school dogs, this appears to be more 'bottom up' where the children have the autonomy to choose what they do with the dog and so this may support understanding of children's perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing.

Acceptance

Children in the present study seemed to perceive that the school dogs offered a sense of acceptance in their interactions with the children which seemed key for why they felt that school dogs affect their wellbeing. In the reviewed literature, Barber and Proops (2019) found that children perceived that the school dog did not tell them off when they got a word wrong when they were reading – this could be interpreted as the dog offering a sense of acceptance when they get a word wrong which helped them to carry on feeling motivated to read. Similarly, Syrnyk et al. (2022) found that children perceived school dogs to be non-judgemental when listening to them read. The present study supports these findings and suggests that it is not just the act of reading to dogs that offers a sense of acceptance, but interactions and activities with school dogs more broadly.

It was interpreted that Aurelia perceived a sense of freedom when she was with the school dog where she felt that the dog accepted her for who she really was and could be

herself rather than pretending to be someone else like she feels she does within the school environment. Linked to this, it was interpreted that both Amber and Daisy perceived that the school dog offers unconditional positive regard as they spoke about how the dogs always jumped up on them. This was interpreted to mean that the dog offers a sense of acceptance towards them no matter what. This finding could be explained by Rogers' (1989) core conditions model – where unconditional positive regard is argued to be one of the three components for an effective therapist. This therefore offers further understanding of children's perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing.

All three of Rogers' (1989) core conditions have been discussed in the present research, suggesting that children perceive school dogs as possessing all three of these conditions – this aligns with Jenkins et al.'s (2014) study. This therefore suggests the importance of Rogers' (1989) model according to children when they are considering why school dogs may support their wellbeing which offers clues about how to implement DAIs.

Emotionally attuned and responsive

Children in the present study appeared to perceive that school dogs are emotionally attuned and responsive which seemed a key perception for why they felt that school dogs affect their wellbeing. This was interpreted to mean that the school dogs were able to tune into and sense how the children feel and respond in a way that helps them to feel better. For example, Kyle seemed to describe his experience of the school dog having a fine-tuned sense to pick up on how he is feeling without having to verbally say. These fine-tuned senses of school dogs may be partly in-line with Barber and Proops (2019) and Syrnyk et al. (2022), who both found that children felt that the school dogs were good at listening. However, Kyle seemed to feel that the dog picks up on something in the air rather than listening to him, to know how Kyle is feeling. This finding therefore differs slightly to the reviewed literature, highlighting how different children may perceive there to be different reasons for why school dogs affect their wellbeing.

Lara and Aurelia in the present study seemed to perceive that as well as the school dogs tuning into how they are feeling, the school dogs seemed to know exactly what they needed to do to help the children feel better. This formed the 'responsive' part of this subtheme. This was not a finding that was present within the reviewed literature and so this

adds detail and insight into how children may make sense of their experiences. This seems to link with the notion of relational approaches in schools, whereby when there is a focus on understanding what a behaviour is communicating (i.e. like the dogs seem to know according to Lara and Aurelia), there can be positive outcomes such as improved emotional regulation (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

How the school utilises the dog

Children in the present study seemed to perceive how their school utilises the dog was a reason why school dogs affect their wellbeing. This has some links with the reviewed literature in that the type of activities were discussed in all studies within the SLR (Barber & Proops, 2019; Bruneau et al., 2023; Henderson et al., 2020; Pinto & Foulkes, 2015; Sorin et al., 2015; Steel, 2022; Syrnyk et al., 2022; Zents et al. 2017). As previously noted, all but two of the studies within the SLR specifically focused upon reading to dogs, whereas the present study explored children interacting with school dogs more generally. The present study therefore contributes to the research literature and understanding around children interacting with school dogs more broadly.

According to Kyle and Sophie in the present study, it seemed that having a sense of autonomy to decide when to see the dog was supportive of their wellbeing. For Sophie, there seemed to be a sense of tension when a teacher did not let her use her pass to see the dog as it had been originally agreed with her. This was interpreted to mean that Sophie's sense of autonomy was removed which led to feelings of frustration and anger for her where the situation escalated. For Kyle however, he described how he goes to visit the dog at naturally occurring transitions such as on his way in from break or on his way back from the toilet. This was interpreted to mean that Kyle feels a sense of autonomy in that these brief visits throughout the day are viewed as acceptable and 'allowed' by school staff which impacted his wellbeing positively. Overall, this was not a finding that was interpreted as present within previous studies, so is therefore another novel finding.

In contrast to Kyle and Sophie, according to Lara in the present study, it seemed that the school dog 'meeting and greeting' her by the school gate in the mornings was supportive for her to feel more able to go into school. This appears to align with Zents et al. (2017) from the reviewed research who found that school dogs increased student attendance to school.

This may again link to the research in favour of relational approaches in school (Bergin & Bergin, 2009) – in Lara's case, it seemed that the school had utilised the dog in such as way where there was a focus on the relationship between Lara and the dog.

5.4.5 Changes in Thoughts

Changes in thoughts was interpreted to be of importance in children's perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing. This finding was not present within the reviewed literature in the SLR but aligns with the cognitive perspective within Geist's (2011) theoretical framework of AAIs, therefore adding weight to this framework.

It was interpreted that Lara perceived the school dog as giving her a sense of escapism where her feelings of worry about family circumstances such as parental separation felt lifted, and nothing else mattered other than that moment with the school dog. This had some similarities with Elijah's perceptions, where he seemed to describe how being with the school dog helps him to focus on the here and now, where his negative thoughts about his anger at other people seem to disappear. Similarly, it was interpreted that Aurelia perceived that the dog served as a distraction from overwhelming thoughts and feelings of worry related to the school environment. However, for Aurelia, she seemed to attribute this to feeling a responsibility for the dog as it was a staff member's dog, and she was so focused on ensuring the dog was safe, that her negative thoughts were overridden. Overall, the absence of thoughts is not a finding that is present within literature and so this is a novel finding.

For Kyle, it was interpreted that he perceived a change in his thoughts, but in contrast with Lara, Elijah, and Aurelia, he seemed to perceive that instead of his thoughts disappearing, the school dog helped him to be more aware and mindful of his thoughts. This finding contrasts with the literature where the presence of a therapy dog did not provide any additional benefits to a mindfulness intervention (Henry & Crowley, 2015). This is therefore a novel finding.

Siegel (1999) argued that from a cognitive perspective, AAIs change an individual's thoughts about themselves and therefore change their feelings and behaviour. This was not directly supported by the 'changes in thoughts' GET as the children's thoughts in this instance seemed unrelated to thoughts about themselves, it seemed more related to the presence and

absence of thoughts. However, findings within the 'feeling good' GET and 'positive self-perception' subtheme may support Siegel's (1999) view.

5.5 Comparison of IPA Themes to Thematic Synthesis in SLR

These interpretations can be compared with the thematic synthesis conducted in the SLR presented in Chapter 2 to consider what the present research has added to what is already known. The thematic synthesis offered six analytical themes which were *hedonic wellbeing, eudaimonic wellbeing, characteristics of the dog, relationships, school climate,* and *activities with the dog.* These themes are all represented within the present findings, therefore strengthening previous findings. This suggests that these themes are of key importance in children's experience of school dogs supporting their wellbeing. The present research adds a deeper level of insight into children's experiences which extended the previous findings and also led to novel themes such as emotional attachment and changes in thoughts.

Feeling good was interpreted as a Group Experiential Theme in the present study supporting the 'hedonic wellbeing' theme in the thematic synthesis of the literature. The present findings offer deeper insight into how children make sense of their experiences of this. For example, in the present study, it was interpreted that children experienced a consistent and predictable presence of positive emotions rather than the mere presence of positive emotions. Additionally, further insight was gained into the life experiences the children attributed to their feelings e.g. worry and so when they described experiencing the absence of this, it provided a more meaningful insight into what this may have been like for them. The present study also provides further insight into children's experiences of feeling good/hedonic wellbeing by providing a different interpretation in that stroking the dog led to improved emotional regulation and a calm state. Lastly, the present study interpreted some novel findings in relation to children's experience of feeling good. Increased social confidence was interpreted, along with insight into children's experiences of this including previous bullying and how this has now ceased. A broad sense of accomplishment was also a novel finding here. These novel findings may be due to the focus upon reading to dogs in the SLR studies, whereas the present study explored interacting with school dogs more broadly.

Functioning well was interpreted as a Group Experiential Theme in the present study supporting the 'eudaimonic wellbeing' theme in the thematic synthesis of the literature. This theme was only present for half of the SLR studies and so the present study supports that children seem to perceive that school dogs support functioning. Furthermore, as this theme appeared to be present for all seven of the children in the present study, perhaps this is due to exploring interactions with school dogs broadly, rather than the specific focus of reading to dogs like most of the SLR studies. The present study interpreted that children experienced increased engagement with school and attendance as a result of the school dog, strengthening findings from the thematic synthesis. A standalone theme within the thematic synthesis was 'relationships,' however, in the present study, this was interpreted to be within the 'functioning well' group experiential theme, therefore offering a new interpretation compared with the thematic synthesis. The present study also offered insight into children's experiences of improved relationships with staff and peers. Improved peer relationships was also not a finding present within the thematic synthesis. This therefore increases understanding of how school dogs are experienced and how they may contribute to a school's relational approach and the positive outcomes linked to this. Furthermore, the 'school climate' theme within the thematic synthesis included children perceiving that DAIs helped them to be able to attend school. This finding was also supported in the present study but was interpreted within the 'functioning well' GET, therefore representing a new interpretation.

Emotional attachment was interpreted as a Group Experiential Theme in the present study. This did not emerge as a standalone theme in the thematic synthesis, therefore offering a new interpretation from the present study. This may be because the children in the present study had interacted with school dogs broadly, whereas most of the SLR studies specifically focused upon reading to dogs. Therefore, the present research increases understanding of how school dogs are experienced and suggesting that school dogs can be an important contributor to a school's relational approach.

Sense of belonging was interpreted as a Group Experiential Theme in the present study. This was not interpreted to be a standalone theme within the thematic synthesis, but this was within the relationships analytical theme. The present study therefore strengthens previous interpretations of sense of belonging. It also adds additional insight into children's

experience of this as there were some differences such as experiencing a sense of belonging with the school dog for one child (which was in-line with a study in the SLR) and experiencing a sense of belonging with peers for other children (which was not in-line with any findings in the SLR). The present study therefore adds to previous understanding and suggests that school dogs can make an important contribution to sense of belonging and a school's relational approach.

Characteristics of school dogs was interpreted as a Group Experiential Theme in the present study. This appears in-line with the 'characteristics of the dog' theme from the thematic synthesis, therefore adding weight to this being an important part of children's experience of why school dogs affect their wellbeing. The present study adds depth to this theme and increases understanding of how this is experienced. This included examples of how children perceived school dogs to be free from human complexities and they described different experiences of this. This also included examples of how the children perceived the dogs' physical appearance and features as supportive of their wellbeing which was in-line with the SLR findings and providing further detail. The present study therefore adds detail and insight into this finding which may provide clues or insight into how other children may make sense of school dogs supporting their wellbeing.

Nature of interactions with school dogs was interpreted as a Group Experiential Theme in the present study. This appears partly in-line with findings within the thematic synthesis and extends understanding as further detail and insight is provided. Also, this was not a standalone theme within the thematic synthesis, therefore providing a new interpretation on the importance of this for the children in the present study. Subthemes in the present study such as 'emotionally attuned and responsive,' 'acceptance,' and 'how the school utilises the dog' may have important links with relational approaches and so the present study provides insight into how school dogs may be incorporated into this for other children.

Changes in thoughts was interpreted as a Group Experiential Theme in the present study. This did not appear within the thematic synthesis and so therefore offers a new interpretation for children's perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing. This may be because the children in the present study had interacted with school dogs broadly, whereas most of the SLR studies specifically focused upon reading to dogs. This offers novel

insight into children's experiences which may help professionals to understand why they are implementing this support.

5.6 Summary

This research aimed to answer two research questions. The first question was 'What are children's perceptions of how school dogs affect their wellbeing?' The findings highlighted two Group Experiential Themes: *feeling good* and *functioning well*. The second question was 'What are children's perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing?' The findings highlighted five Group Experiential Themes: *emotional attachment, sense of belonging, characteristics of school dogs, nature of interactions with school dogs*, and *changes in thoughts*. Some of these findings add weight to previous interpretations from other studies and some of these findings were novel. The IPA methodology added deeper meaning and insight into children's experiences that goes beyond a descriptive level. This has increased understanding of how children make sense of their experiences with school dogs supporting their wellbeing by adding depth. The methodology of the current research will now be reviewed, followed by suggesting the distinctive contribution and highlighting potential implications for practice and further research.

5.7 Methodological Review

It is necessary to review the quality of the study before implications for practice can be considered. The research attempted to adhere to Yardley's (2000) criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research, details of which can be referred to in section 3.7.

The present research aimed to explore how children make sense of their views and experiences of school dogs supporting their wellbeing. An interpretivist paradigm was adopted aiming to gain a deeper understanding of children's multiple and individual realities of their experiences with school dogs. IPA is considered to have been an appropriate methodology to meet the research's aim and to answer the research questions.

The small sample size of seven participants allowed an in-depth engagement with the data, with an idiographic and phenomenological focus in-lined with the aim of this study. This therefore demonstrates *sensitivity* and *rigour*. However, IPA's ability to provide rich and detailed findings in some ways can be a weakness; I do not seek to claim transferability of the

findings as due to the small and relatively homogenous sample, the findings are not representative of all children who have spent time with school dogs. Instead, it is hoped that the findings may offer tentative conclusions for how other children may make sense of experiences with school dogs. In turn, it is hoped this will offer practical *importance* for educational professionals. This is explored further in section 5.9.

Another strength of IPA is the hermeneutic element in that it offers an analytical interpretation of the findings which can provide a more meaningful understanding i.e. more than the sum of the parts. This can also be argued to be a limitation as I consider it to have been inevitable that I have influenced the research process and findings and a different researcher may have influenced and interpreted the findings differently. Steps were taken to counter this to remain as *transparent* about the process as possible. For example, I kept a research journal throughout and I described the research process in detail using photos to illustrate this.

The research may have been somewhat limited in depth due to a number of factors. Firstly, the interview schedule was not piloted with the target population due to concerns around the potentially limited number of potential participants and not wanting to exclude any participants from the dataset. Instead, I piloted the schedule with a family member and listened back to the first two interviews to consider what went well and what I would do differently next time. As highlighted in Chapter 3, there were a number of adaptations I made based on this such as changes in language used and a conscious use of pauses. I found that my interview technique improved throughout the process as I gained more experience of conducting the interviews. Had I piloted the interview schedule and managed to recruit enough participants for the study, this may have led to a more phenomenological focus in the dataset from the first interview. However, by not piloting the interview schedule, it meant I could include the first two participants' accounts in my dataset which I felt led to a greater range of experiences and views shared.

An issue recognised as a challenge by others (Smith et al., 2022) is not probing enough during the interviews to evoke enough depth and detail of participants' experiences. Throughout piloting the interview schedule with a family member and discussions with my research tutor, I carefully planned some prompting and probing questions to elicit detail about participants' experiences. This is in-line with Smith (2004) who suggests that open

questions may be challenging for children and further prompts are needed. I felt that some participants were more able (or felt more able) to provide detailed answers and think more abstractly than others. Therefore, some participants' answers were not as in depth as I had initially hoped which will have limited the detail and insight of the findings. I felt there to be a 'trade off' between gaining more detailed insight and ensuring participants felt comfortable and happy to continue; for example, if I were to probe too much, I may have made participants feel inadequate or anxious. Therefore, where it was clear participants were not sure how to expand upon their answers, I moved onto a different question. As a result, all participants were happy to continue, protected from harm, and no children wanted to withdraw from the study.

Linked to this above point, there were one or two occasions where participants did not feel comfortable to expand upon their answers. For example, I asked Kyle what he meant by *"feeling down"* (line 61) and he did not wish to answer this. Perhaps this was because he felt this was too personal or highly emotional to share with an adult he had just met. In attempt to build rapport with participants, I spent the first 10-15 minutes of meeting them asking about their hobbies and interests, as well as meeting the school dogs with the children. However, this was perhaps not enough time to build a strong sense of rapport where participants may have felt more at ease and more able to share their personal views and experiences. I did consider the possibility of meeting participants prior to the interviews to build rapport, however due to the time constraints of the study and the interviews occurring just before the end of term, this would not have been feasible. Therefore, this may have further limited the level of detail into participants' experiences. I did however find that the skills I have been developing throughout my EP training were helpful for developing rapport as the interviews went on, for example, active listening, and showing empathy. I felt that these skills allowed participants to feel more at ease and share more insight into their experiences and views as the interviews went on.

Despite having some limitations, using Yardley's (2000) criteria for this study would suggest it appears to be of an acceptable quality. See Section 3.7 for further details.

5.8 Distinctive Contribution

As highlighted in the literature review, a large proportion of the previous research into children's views and experiences of school dogs supporting their wellbeing has a specific focus upon reading to dogs. The limited number of studies exploring a range of children's activities and interactions with school dogs (e.g. Pinto & Foulkes, 2015; Zents et al., 2017) were not based in UK schools and offer a descriptive insight. Previous research therefore fails to explore a range of children's activities/interactions with school dogs in depth and limits understanding.

The present study is grounded in the theoretical principles of IPA through being phenomenological, hermeneutic, and idiographic. I have offered my interpretations of how children make sense of their lived experiences of school dogs supporting their wellbeing within UK schools. The idiographic principle is demonstrated by presenting and discussing the uniqueness of children's experiences in Chapter 4 and 5. This study extends previous research by offering a deeper exploration into a range of children's experiences of interacting with school dogs, as opposed to a specific focus e.g. reading to dogs.

The findings of the present study strengthen some findings within previous research, as well as offer novel insight. Findings that have been strengthened include improvements in hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing, characteristics of school dogs and nature of interactions with school dogs being supportive of wellbeing, and school dogs being supportive of a sense of belonging. Novel insight which seems to link with Geist's (2011) theoretical framework but is not prevalent within previous research included children's experiences of emotional attachment with the school dogs, and changes in thoughts. This research therefore suggests that educational professionals may benefit from developing their understanding and practice in relation to DAIs to support children's wellbeing. The implications of these findings will be discussed in section 5.9.

5.9 Implications for Educational Professionals' Practice

In-line with Yardley's (2000) criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research, the impact and importance of the present research will now be highlighted. For this section, I will consider the unique interpretations, conclusions, and previous literature to propose possible implications for practice.

5.9.1 Schools

Overall, the present findings may help to develop school professionals' understanding of how DAIs can support wellbeing, as well as understanding of children's perceptions of why. It is hoped that this would be helpful for a school who currently have, or are considering getting, a school dog as research suggests that when school staff understand the theory and research behind an intervention, they are more motivated to implement it well (Orchard & Winch, 2015). More specific details of what this improved understanding may include will now be considered.

Supporting children's hedonic wellbeing

The present findings highlight that improvements in hedonic wellbeing were of key importance for children in this study. This therefore suggests it would be appropriate for children to spend time with a school dog if there are concerns about how they are feeling as it has the potential to improve this. More specifically, the present findings suggest that school dogs are linked with some children having a positive self-perception which impacted on their social confidence and functioning. Therefore, spending time with a school dog may be appropriate for a child with limited social confidence and social skills. Furthermore, the present findings suggest that school dogs have a calming influence for some children. This suggests that spending time with a school dog may be appropriate for children who have emotional regulation difficulties and engaging in a range of activities with the dog may support this.

Supporting children's eudaimonic wellbeing

The findings highlight that improvements in eudaimonic wellbeing were of key importance for children in this study. This suggests it would be appropriate for children to spend time with school dogs if there are concerns around their functioning (e.g. engagement with school work, school attendance, and developing relationships).

Activities and interactions with school dogs

The present findings suggest that a range of activities and interactions with school dogs were perceived to be beneficial for children's wellbeing. This included walking the dogs, stroking and cuddling the dogs, chatting to the dogs, lying down with the dogs, playing with

the dogs, and simply watching the dogs. None of the children talked about reading to dogs, which was a prevalent activity linked with wellbeing within the previous literature (Barber & Proops, 2019; Steel, 2022; Syrnyk et al., 2022). This therefore suggests that a range of activities and interactions with school dogs have the potential to support children's wellbeing and so schools should aim to offer this. Furthermore, the present findings suggested that a sense of autonomy for when to see the dog was an important experience and so schools could offer this – for example, a time out card to leave a lesson when they feel they would benefit from seeing the dog, or having an 'open door' policy where the children know they can go to see the dog at any time they feel the need to.

The importance of a relational approach

The present findings support the value and importance of schools developing a relational approach to support children's wellbeing and how school dogs can play an important role in this. For example, all three of Roger's (1989) core conditions were perceived by the children to be present in their interactions with school dogs. This suggests that it would be beneficial for staff to adopt this approach, even if they do not have a school dog. The present findings also suggest that children perceived the school dogs to improve their engagement with school such as improved concentration and feeling more able to attend school during challenging circumstances. This may link with children's perceptions around there being an emotional attachment with the dog in that the dogs serviced as a 'secure base' for them in school when their parents couldn't be there. This suggests that schools could utilise a school dog's support like they would with key adult support for example, a 'meet and greet' upon arrival at school and for children to go to at times of distress to regulate. They could also support children's sense of permanency and constancy by providing frequent reminders of the dogs throughout the day.

5.9.2 Educational Psychologists

The present findings have developed the evidence base for the use of school dogs to support children's wellbeing in schools. This offers helpful insight to Educational Psychologists (EPs) work at an individual level as well as an organisational and systems level.

Individual level

EPs have a key role in the graduated response to supporting children's SEND (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015). As the present findings extend the evidence base for school dogs supporting children's wellbeing, it is hoped that the findings provide practical importance for how a DAI may be planned and implemented. This could follow after an EP's assessment of a child's needs has identified difficulties with hedonic wellbeing such as low mood or anxiety, and/or difficulties with eudaimonic wellbeing such as social interactions and engagement with learning. EPs may discuss these findings in a consultation with professionals and parents/carers to increase their understanding of why a DAI may support children's wellbeing and to provide clues or ideas for how it could be implemented. An EP may then review how a DAI has gone for an individual child by following up on their progress and working collaboratively with the adults to adapt the DAI in-line with the individual child's experience and circumstances.

The present study has highlighted the importance of gaining children's voice on their experiences as interesting detail and insight has been sought. Therefore, an implication for EPs is the importance of gaining children's views in casework so that support can be well suited to their individual needs and circumstances.

Organisational and systems level

An implication for EPs working at an organisational level may be for them to provide ongoing support, training, and coaching with the development of an intervention. The present findings could be disseminated to school staff who are considering utilising a school dog. This could be in the form of training. This would help to increase school staff's understanding of these children's experience and support staff to have ideas and insight into how this may be implemented to support children in their own school. Alternatively, EPs could support school staff with ongoing utilisation of school dogs through coaching. For example, homing in on specific aspects of the findings such as how to increase children's sense of autonomy with seeing the dog or how to develop a sense of permanency and constancy within the schools.

An implication for EPs working at a systemic level may be that the present findings could be incorporated into attachment and trauma training that is delivered to schools and how school dogs may form a part of this. Additionally, as highlighted by (Zafeiriou & Gulliford,

2020), EPs are well-placed to support schools with policy development. The present findings may support EPs with incorporating the use of school dogs into the relational policy.

5.10 Implications for future research

As highlighted in section 5.7, there were some issues encountered in the present research whereby some participants found it challenging to answer the more abstract and analytical questions and to expand upon their answers. Perhaps future research could mitigate this by considering the use of different tools for scaffolding the elicitation of children's views.

The present research had an idiographic focus wherein seven children's individual experiences of school dogs supporting their wellbeing were explored. All children attended mainstream school settings within the same local authority (LA) within The Midlands. Future research could be carried out with a wider population such as different age ranges, different educational settings, or geographical location. It would be interesting for future research to consider the transferability of the present findings and explore whether the accounts from these children are supported by children with experience of school dogs within a different LA.

As there is limited previous research exploring the theoretical basis on DAIs in schools, the present research provides tentative conclusions about children's views of this. It would be worthwhile conducting future research using different methodologies to strengthen this evidence. For example, Grounded Theory may offer inductive theories for explaining why school dogs may support wellbeing, and a Narrative Inquiry may help to contextualise children's experiences.

Lastly, future research could develop a tool to monitor the impact of DAIs in schools on children's wellbeing. Perhaps this could be based around a model of wellbeing such as Seligman's (2011) PERMA model and guided by the tentative conclusions from this study.

5.11 Conclusion

This study has provided a valuable insight into children's experiences of school dogs supporting their wellbeing which had not been explored using IPA previously. There has been a rise in children's SEMH and wellbeing needs in recent years (Cui & Hong, 2021; NHS, 2022), and there is a range of research documenting the potential positive impact of AAIs in support

of this (Ávila-Álvarez et al., 2020; Correale et al., 2022; Muckle & Lasikiewicz, 2017). This context highlighted a worthwhile area to explore, to consider how children's wellbeing could be supported.

The literature review highlighted the potential positive outcomes of AAIs for supporting children's SEMH and wellbeing. For example, in clinical settings, AAIs have been linked to reduced anxiety (Correale et al., 2022), improved mood (Ávila-Álvarez et al., 2020), and increased global functioning and improvement in school attendance (Stefanini et al., 2015). In education settings, AAIs have been linked to improved wellbeing (Muckle & Lasikiewicz, 2017) and improved functioning such as improved reading skills (Hall et al., 2016) as well as others. It was identified that there was a lack of research exploring children's views and experience of DAIs in UK schools. Furthermore, there were no previous studies exploring children's views and experiences of a range of activities and interactions within DAIs within the UK as the majority of previous literature focused upon reading to dogs (Hall et al., 2016).

To fill this gap, exploratory qualitative research was carried out. This research aimed to explore how children make sense of their views and experiences of school dogs supporting their wellbeing. The research aimed to answer two research questions. The first research question was 'What are children's perceptions of how school dogs affect their wellbeing?' This was answered with the two group experiential themes *feeling good* and *functioning well.* The second research question was 'What are children's perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing?' This was answered with the five group experiential themes *emotional attachment, sense of belonging, characteristics of the school dogs, nature of interactions with school dogs,* and *changes in thoughts.* Despite participants' experiences appearing to have some similarities, meaning was attributed to their experiences in different ways.

This research provides a distinctive contribution by exploring children's views and experiences of a range of activities and interactions with school dogs within the UK. Furthermore, the IPA methodology provides an in-depth insight into this which is not a methodology that has been used to explore this area before.

A methodological review presented the strengths and limitations of this research. The idiographic nature of this study meant that it was small scale where seven children's views and experiences were explored rigorously and in depth. This research highlighted some

commonalities between participants' experiences, as well as with children in previous research. However, this research does not claim transferability of these findings as due to the small and relatively homogenous sample, they are not representative of all children who have spent time with school dogs. Instead, it is hoped that the findings may offer tentative conclusions for how other children may make sense of experiences with school dogs. In turn, it is hoped this will offer practical importance for educational professionals.

This research has highlighted implications for educational professionals' practice including school staff and educational psychologists. This has included implications relating to increased knowledge and understanding for school staff such as when identifying which needs may be supported by school dogs (hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing). This has also included school staff implications including the importance of developing a relational approach, as well as clues and ideas for how to utilise school dogs to be beneficial for the children they support. Implications for educational psychologists are also highlighted including the importance of gathering children's views, their role in the graduated response for individual casework, their role of ongoing training and coaching to support a DAI on an ongoing basis, and their role with developing relational policies.

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Appendices

Appendix 1A: Systematic Series of Iterations of Search Terms (Iteration 1)

Concept	Search terms
Dog-Assisted Intervention	"therapy dog*" **OR** dog-assisted* **OR** canine-assisted* **OR** animal-assisted*
	AND
Wellbeing	Wellbeing **OR** "mental health"
	AND
School setting	School* **OR** class*
	AND
Qualitative data	Views **OR** perce* **OR** perspective* **OR** experience*

Searched at full text level; Number of studies across the three databases: 1,034; No exclusion search terms used

Appendix 1B: Systematic Series of Iterations of Search Terms (Iteration 2)

Concept	Search terms
Dog-Assisted Intervention	"therapy dog" **OR** dog-assisted* **OR** canine-assisted* **OR** animal-assisted*
	AND
Wellbeing	Wellbeing **OR** "mental health"
	AND
School setting	School* **OR** class*
	AND
Qualitative data	Views **OR** perce* **OR** perspective* **OR** experience*

Searched at Title and Abstract Level; Number of studies across the three databases: 39; No exclusion search terms used

Appendix 1C Final SLR Search Terms (Iteration 3)

Concept	Search terms
Dog-Assisted Intervention	Dog* **OR** "therapy dog" **OR** dog-assisted* **OR** canine-assisted* **OR** animal-assisted*
	AND
Wellbeing	Wellbeing **OR** "well being" **OR** well-being **OR** "mental health" **OR** emo*
	AND
School setting	School* **OR** class*
	AND
Qualitative data	Views **OR** perce* **OR** perspective* **OR** experience* **OR** qualitative

Searched at Title and Abstract Level; Number of studies across the three databases: 271; No exclusion search terms used

Appendix 2: A Table to Show Key Descriptions and Findings of the 8 Included Studies

Authors and Title	Context and Sample	Methodology	Key Qualitative Findings from children's perspective re: wellbeing
Barber & Proops (2019) *Low-Ability Secondary School Students Show Emotional, Motivational, and Performance Benefits when Reading to a Dog Versus a Teacher*	Mainstream secondary school UK based - England 20 participants – all Year 7 aged 11-12 14 male, 6 female All had 'additional educational or emotional needs'	- RTD - 4 x reading sessions – 5 minutes RTD, 5 minutes reading to a teacher - Mixed-methods but the qualitative aspects included: - Questionnaire - asked 3 open-ended questions about RTD experience - Analysed using thematic analysis	- Emotional benefits (calm, happy, 'fun and enjoyment') - The therapy dog herself (the dog listening, physical appearance and behaviour, lack of criticism) - Attitude to reading - 'What was bad' (nothing, self-consciousness)
Bruneau et al. (2023) *Understanding Canine-Assisted Literacy Programs: A Multiple Case Study*	7 participants 2nd grade (Year 3 UK equivalent) Public school Low in confidence (felt by teachers) 3 male 4 female RTD programme US based	- Weekly sessions RTD 20 minutes for 1 school term - 'canine assisted literacy programme' - Included petting the dog, giving treats etc - Qualitative design – interviews and surveys – some looking at reading, some wellbeing too - Pre and post student interviews - Student interviews 4 months after programme - Elementary Reading Attitude Survey – pointed to cartoon character that best matched their feelings and elaborated and asked about their experiences of the programme	- 'enjoyable' and 'memorable' school programme - The dog made them feel 'good' and 'happy' - Does not report on findings re: cartoon picture of feelings

		- "inductive process" – doesn't state data analysis method	
Henderson et al. (2020) *An evaluation of a dog-assisted reading program to support student wellbeing in primary school*	11 participants Aged 7-8 9 male, 2 female Primary school Australia based	8 week, weekly 'Story Dogs' programme (RTD) Semi-structured interviews (10-20 minutes) Thematic analysis	Sense of achievement when reading Positive engagement when reading Themes: emotions, engagement, relationships, achievement
Pinto & Foulkes (2015) *Well-Being and Human-Animal Interactions in Schools: The Case of "Dog Daycare Co-Op"*	'vocationally-oriented high school' 15 participants Aged 15-17 Gender not stated Students had 'exceptionalities' – not elaborated upon Canada based	Students' experiences and perceptions of a 'dog daycare' programme Experienced this programme for a semester Semi-structured interviews Data analysis method unclear	Themes: 'vocational musings' and 'bonding/belongingness'
Sorin et al. (2015) *The Impact of the Classroom Canines Program on Children's Reading, Social and Emotional Skills, and Motivation to Attend School*	11 participants Aged 5-11 Primary School 8 male 3 female all participants identified as working below or at risk of falling below academic benchmark for their year level Australia based	Investigated the impact of the 'Classroom Canines' programme on reading, socio-emotional skills, and motivation to attend school (RTD) children read to the dog for 20 minutes once a week Does not state how long the intervention ran for Mixed-methods Pre and post semi-structured interviews Concepts and themes – does not state what data analysis methodology was followed	Social and emotional effects (Improvements in confidence and sense of self as learners, improvements in peer interaction, improved relationships with teachers and improved relationships with dogs)

Steel (2022) *Children's wellbeing and reading engagement: the impact of reading to dogs in a Scottish Primary 1 classroom*	21 participants Aged 5-6 years 7 male, 14 female Primary school UK based (Scotland)	RTD 3 focus children (representing the 3 reading levels within the sample) took part in semi-structured interviews Thematic analysis	Themes are including teacher perspectives so not listed child perspective findings: Enjoyed the dog visits felt excited made reading fun enjoyed talking to the dog the dogs help children to think
Syrnyk et al. (2022) *Supporting Young Readers: A Mixed-Methods Study of Their Literacy, Behaviour, and Perceptions When Reading Aloud to Dogs or Adults*	24 participants Aged 7-8 years 14 male, 10 female 2 elementary schools - Canada based	Experiences of RTD Each participant took part in both conditions – RTD and reading to an adult 1 x weekly, for 8 weeks, each session lasting 15 minutes Mixed-methods 'exit interviews' with 4 open ended questions with students – thematic content analysis	Liked positive characteristics of the dog e.g. great listeners Positive affirmations to describe their experience with the dog Personal improvement in reading e.g. comfortable Reading impact linked to dog characteristics e.g. non-judgmental Felt calm
Zents et al. (2017) *Paws for Intervention: Perceptions About the Use of Dogs in School*	35 participants Majority of participants in 6^{th}-8^{th} grade or 11^{th}-12^{th} grade 19 male, 16 female 4 schools from rural districts US based	Interview – perceptions on wellbeing and experiences with dogs in school Interviews no longer than 15 minutes Data analysis method not stated – states 'coding'	Interview themes: -Initial reactions to a dog in their school -Use of a therapy dog -Activities with a therapy dog -Relationship with the therapy dog -Effects on school climate -Effects on internal states

Appendix 3: CASP Checklist

Paper for appraisal and reference:

Section A: Are the results valid?

1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?

Yes ☐
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Consider
- what was the goal of the research
- why it was thought important
- its relevance

Comments:

2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?

Yes ☐
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Consider
- If the research seeks to interpret or illuminate the actions and/or subjective experiences of research participants
- Is qualitative research the right methodology for addressing the research goal

Comments:

Is it worth continuing?

3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?

Yes ☐
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Consider
- if the researcher has justified the research design (e.g. have they discussed how they decided which method to use)

Comments:

4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?

Yes ☐
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Consider
- If the researcher has explained how the participants were selected
- If they explained why the participants they selected were the most appropriate to provide access to the type of knowledge sought by the study
- If there are any discussions around recruitment (e.g. why some people chose not to take part)

Comments:

5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?

Yes ☐
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Consider
- If the setting for the data collection was justified
- If it is clear how data were collected (e.g. focus group, semi-structured interview etc.)
- If the researcher has justified the methods chosen
- If the researcher has made the methods explicit (e.g. for interview method, is there an indication of how interviews are conducted, or did they use a topic guide)
- If methods were modified during the study. If so, has the researcher explained how and why
- If the form of data is clear (e.g. tape recordings, video material, notes etc.)
- If the researcher has discussed saturation of data

Comments:

6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?

Yes ☐
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Consider

- If the researcher critically examined their own role, potential bias and influence during (a) formulation of the research questions (b) data collection, including sample recruitment and choice of location
- How the researcher responded to events during the study and whether they considered the implications of any changes in the research design

Comments:

Section B: What are the results?

7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?

Yes ☐
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Consider

- If there are sufficient details of how the research was explained to participants for the reader to assess whether ethical standards were maintained
- If the researcher has discussed issues raised by the study (e.g. issues around informed consent or confidentiality or how they have handled the effects of the study on the participants during and after the study)
- If approval has been sought from the ethics committee

Comments:

8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?

Yes ☐
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Consider
- If there is an in-depth description of the analysis process
- If thematic analysis is used. If so, is it clear how the categories/themes were derived from the data
- Whether the researcher explains how the data presented were selected from the original sample to demonstrate the analysis process
- If sufficient data are presented to support the findings
- To what extent contradictory data are taken into account
- Whether the researcher critically examined their own role, potential bias and influence during analysis and selection of data for presentation

Comments:

9. Is there a clear statement of findings?

Yes ☐
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Consider whether
- If the findings are explicit
- If there is adequate discussion of the evidence both for and against the researcher's arguments
- If the researcher has discussed the credibility of their findings (e.g. triangulation, respondent validation, more than one analyst)
- If the findings are discussed in relation to the original research question

Comments:

Section C: Will the results help locally?

10. How valuable is the research?	HINT: Consider • If the researcher discusses the contribution the study makes to existing knowledge or understanding (e.g. do they consider the findings in relation to current practice or policy, or relevant research-based literature • If they identify new areas where research is necessary • If the researchers have discussed whether or how the findings can be transferred to other populations or considered other ways the research may be used

Comments:	

Appendix 4: CASP scores given to all included studies (WoE A)

Author	Barber & Proops (2019)	Brenau et al. (2023)	Henderson et al. (2020)	Pinto & Foulkes (2015)	Sorin et al. (2015)	Steel (2022)	Syrnyk et al. (2022)	Zents et al. (2017)
Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	3	3	3	0	3	3	2	3
Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3
Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	3	1	3	1	3	3	2	3
Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	3	2	2	1	2	3	2	2

Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	2
Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	2	2	2	2	0	2	2	2
Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	2	1	3	1	1	1	2	1
Is there a clear statement of findings?	2	1	3	2	2	1	2	2
How valuable is the research?	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	2

Key: Yes = 3, partially = 2, can't tell = 1, no = 0

Appendix 5: Weight of Evidence Criteria used to give Ratings for WoE B and WoE C

Weight of Evidence B How appropriate the study design is for answering the review question	**High**	-Methods for gaining detailed children's views and experiences were used – e.g. interview last longer than 15 minutes, a range of questions on a survey (3+ open-ended questions) -Range of participants (6+)
	Medium	-Limited detail (e.g. study did not focus on children's views and experiences and as a result was only a short interview (15 mins or less) or not a range of questions asked on a survey -Mid number of participants (4-5)
	Low	-Small number of participants (3 or fewer)
Weight of Evidence C The relevance of the findings in answering the review question	**High**	-Offers 'thick' qualitative data in relation to children's views **and** experiences
	Medium	-Offers 'thick' qualitative data in relation to children's views **or** experiences
	Low	-Offers 'thin' qualitative data in relation to children's views and/or experiences

Appendix 6: Descriptive themes from studies and raw data with my coding and descriptive themes

Author	Codes	Descriptive Themes
Barber & Proops (2019)	N/A – themes taken from study	-Emotional Benefits – Calm, happy, fun and enjoyment -The therapy dog herself – the dog listening, physical appearance and behaviour, lack of criticism -Attitude to reading -What was bad – nothing, self-consciousness
Bruneau et al. (2023)	feel good and happy, enjoyed physical contact, liked giving treats, special interest in caring for the dog, reading improvement, reading confidence, enjoyable and memorable experience	hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing, enjoyable and interesting experience, achievement, improved reading confidence
Henderson et al. (2020)	N/A - themes taken from study	-emotions -engagement -relationships -achievement
Pinto & Foulkes (2015)	N/A - themes taken from study	-Vocational musings -bonding/belonging
Sorin et al. (2015)	N/A - themes taken from study	Social and emotional effects (Improvements in confidence and sense of self as learners, improvements in peer interaction, improved relationships with dogs)
Steel (2022)	talking to the dog, enjoyable, improved concentration, the dog enjoys being read to, the dog would tell someone to be nice	-emotional benefits -concentration -fun and enjoyable -dog characteristics

Syrnyk et al. (2022)	good listeners, non-judgemental, emotional benefits, reading to the dog, petting the dog, reading improvement	-dog characteristics -activities with the dog -achievement
Zents et al. (2017)	N/A - themes taken from study	-Initial reactions to a dog in their school -Use of a therapy dog -Activities with a therapy dog -Relationship with the therapy dog -Effects on school climate -Effects on internal states

Appendix 7: A Table to Show how Descriptive Themes were Arranged into Analytical Themes

Analytical Themes	Descriptive Themes
Activities with the dog	Activities with the dog
Hedonic Wellbeing	Emotional benefits
	Confidence as a learner
	Effect on internal states
	Enjoyable and interesting experience
Eudaimonic Wellbeing	Confidence as a learner
	Achievement
	Improved concentration
	Engagement and attitude to learning
	Vocational musings
Characteristics of the dog	Characteristics of the dog
Relationships	Bonding/belonging
School Climate	School climate

Appendix 8: Ethical Approval Letter

The University of Nottingham
UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

School of Psychology
The University of Nottingham
University Park
Nottingham
NG7 2RD

tel: +44 (0)115 846 7403 or (0)115 951 4344

SJ/tp

Ref: S1515

Monday 15th May 2023

Dear Kate Smith & Mark Izzard-Snape

Ethics Committee Review

Thank you for submitting an account of your proposed research 'An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of Children & Young People's Experiences and Views of Dogs Supporting Wellbeing in Primary & Secondary Schools.'

That proposal has now been reviewed and we are pleased to tell you it has met with the Committee's approval.

However:
Please note the following comments from our reviewers.

Reviewer One:

- You outline that participants will be excluded if they have experienced trauma but there is no information on how or where you will collect and store this sensitive information. You should present the study inclusion and exclusion criteria in your information sheets to allow headteachers to nominate eligible participants and parents to decide whether their child is suitable for the study.
- You do not give much detailed information on how you will securely store participants' interview data in accordance with GDPR. This should be in your information sheets. Related to this point:
- It is normally standard practice in interviews to give participants a clear indication of the timeline for when their data can be withdrawn, and after which point it is likely anonymized and analyzed and presented in reports.
- There are two conflicting dates for when you will keep audio data - July 2023 (privacy statement) and July 2024 (information sheets). Ensure these are consistent.
- It is not clear to me why the audio data needs to be kept until July 2024. You will have interview transcripts automatically generated through your recordings, and these can be checked and edited quickly, and then the audio data deleted immediately after verifying the transcript is correct. Carefully consider the length of time you need to retain this personal data and delete it as soon as possible.
- There are a few issues to consider with your consent forms:
- You ask for permission to share data with other researchers as long as it is fully anonymized and protects participants' identity. This is not straightforward with qualitative interview data. You instead should outline the measures you will take to protect identity (e.g., removal of names of schools, people, places) and then put in a disclaimer to say that while you will take these measures you cannot fully ensure anonymity if they have shared these experiences with others.

The University of Nottingham
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- Do you need a statement that says if/when you would break confidentiality? For example, if the participant discusses harm to self/others.
- Your consent forms potentially contradict one another - headteachers can withdraw a participant, as can parents, and pupils. Consider who you need to inform about the study to gain access via gatekeepers, and who should consent to the study (parents/children).
- To include written consent for the audio recordings.

Independently of the Ethics Committee procedures, supervisors also have responsibilities for the risk assessment of projects as detailed in the safety pages of the University web site. Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace, or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.
Yours sincerely

Professor Stephen Jackson
Chair, Ethics Committee

Appendix 9: School recruitment email

Research Opportunity!

Good Morning X,

My name is Kate Smith, and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Nottingham currently on placement in X Educational Psychology Service. I am contacting you as you recently completed my questionnaire exploring:

How schools in X are using dogs to support children's wellbeing.

Thank you very much for completing this. I am pleased to say that I have decided to go ahead with this research, and I am hoping you're still willing to be involved!

I have attached an information sheet (for headteachers and other school staff) about the study for you to read. <u>After reading this, I am hoping you may have 1 or 2 children in mind who meet the eligibility criteria and may be willing to share their views and be potential participants in the study.</u>

I would be very grateful if you could reply to this email at your earliest convenience **by Friday 16th June 2023** with whether:

- You're willing for your school to be involved in the study (please also let me know if you are no longer interested or able to be involved)
- You have at least 1 pupil in mind who meets the eligibility criteria on the information sheet, and you think they may be willing to chat about their views and experiences with me

If you confirm both of the above, I will be in touch to discuss next steps.

Please note, if I receive more responses than I need for the study, I will contact schools who reply on a first come first served basis.

If you have any questions, please ask!

Thank you very much – I look forward to hearing from you.

Kate Smith

Trainee Educational Psychologist

Appendix 10: Information sheet for school staff

School of Psychology

Information Sheet

For Headteachers & School Staff

The University of Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Title of Project: **An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of Children and Young People's Views and Experiences of Dogs Supporting Wellbeing in Primary and Secondary Schools**

Ethics Approval Number: S1515

Researcher: Kate Smith

Supervisor: Dr Mark Izzard-Snape

Contact Details: Kate.Smith@nottingham.ac.uk

Mark.Izzard-Snape@nottingham.ac.uk

My name is Kate Smith, and I am a doctoral student training to become an Educational Psychologist at The University of Nottingham. I am undertaking research to explore children and young people's views and experiences of working with dogs in schools to support their wellbeing. The goal of this research is to explore how this type of intervention can support pupils and how may be best to support schools with implementation.

I am contacting mainstream primary and secondary schools and I am looking to recruit pupils who meet the following eligibility criteria:

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
To be a pupil in Key Stage 2 - 4	Have experienced significant trauma (e.g. Looked After Children, children on a foster placement, children with a special guardianship, children who have experienced a bereavement in the last 6 months)
To have English language proficiency	Children who are currently under the Child

(expressive and receptive) of Key Stage 2 level or above	and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) or having therapy from a therapist
To have experienced working therapeutically (in any way) with a dog in school for at least 4 weeks	

The research involves a one-to-one interview with pupils that will take no longer than 45 minutes. This would be conducted at your school, with your permission. I am hoping to recruit 1-2 children from your school. The interviews will, as far as possible, be kept confidential. The only time I would break this confidentiality would be if a participant discusses something where I am concerned about their safety or the safety of others – in which case, I will report this onto the designated safeguarding lead in school.

Interviews will be audio recorded via Microsoft Teams and this will be stored safely, in-line with GDPR until no later than 31st August 2023. On this date, recordings will be transcribed, and recordings destroyed. The transcript will be presented, as far as possible, anonymously (including removal of any names of the school, people or places) within my write up. However, I cannot guarantee full anonymity (e.g. if the participant has shared their views and experiences with someone else previously and that person then reads the transcript within my research).

I will gain fully informed written consent from parents/carers, as well as fully informed verbal consent from participants themselves before beginning the interview and I will check with them throughout that they are still happy to be involved.

Parents/carers are free to withdraw their child at any point before, during, or after the study (up until 31st August 2023 when data will be anonymised). All data collected will be kept confidential (as far as possible – as above) and used for research purposes only. It will be stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act.

I hope that you will consider involving your school in this research. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me using the above contact details.

Thank you for reading this information sheet and considering your school's participation.

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:
Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix 11: Recruitment email sent to parents/carers

Children's views and experiences of dogs supporting wellbeing in schools.

I am looking to gain insight into how children experience working with a dog in school and their views on how and why it may support their wellbeing. This may help to guide schools and professionals with how to provide support of this nature in the future.

I have contacted X at X School and she has indicated that your child meets the study's eligibility criteria and that they may be interested in participating in the study.

I very much hope that your child would like to take part in my research, and that you would be willing for them to take part. I have enclosed two information sheets (one for parents/carers and one for children) for you and your child to read. After reading these, please talk to your child about the research and ask them whether they would be willing to take part.

I am hoping to give you a phone call tomorrow (Tuesday 13th June) to introduce myself and to answer any questions you may have. Feel free to also email me with any questions.

After we speak on Tuesday, if your child would like to take part and you are also willing for them to take part, please fill out the attached consent form and return this back to me by email.

Thank you for taking the time to consider your child's participation.

Yours Sincerely,

Kate Smith

Trainee Educational Psychologist

Appendix 12: Information sheet for parents/carers

School of Psychology

Information Sheet

For Parents/Carers

The University of Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Title of Project: **An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of Children and Young People's Views and Experiences of Dogs Supporting Wellbeing in Primary and Secondary Schools**

Ethics Approval Number: S1515

Researcher: Kate Smith

Supervisor: Dr Mark Izzard-Snape

Contact Details: Kate.Smith@nottingham.ac.uk

Mark.Izzard-Snape@nottingham.ac.uk

This is an invitation for your child to take part in a research study. Before you decide if you wish for your child to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

My name is Kate Smith, and I am a doctoral student training to become an Educational Psychologist at The University of Nottingham. I am undertaking research to explore children and young people's views and experiences of working with dogs in schools to support their wellbeing. The goal of this research is to explore how this type of intervention can support pupils and how may be best to support schools with implementation.

I would like to meet with your child to talk about their views and experiences of working with a dog in school. The interview will take place at your child's school and will take no longer than 45 minutes.

The interview will, as far as possible, be kept confidential. The only time I would break this confidentiality would be if your child discusses something where I am concerned about their safety or the safety of others. In this case, I would report this onto the designated safeguarding lead in your child's school.

The interview will be audio recorded via Microsoft Teams and this will be stored securely, in-line with GDPR until it is transcribed no later than 31st August 2023. The recording will be destroyed on this date. The transcript will be presented, as far as possible, anonymously - however, I cannot guarantee complete anonymity (e.g. if your child has shared their views and experiences with someone else previously and that person then reads the transcript within my research). I will take measures to protect identity as far as possible including removal of any names of the school, people, or places.

I will gain fully informed verbal consent from your child before beginning the interview and I will check with them throughout that they are still happy to be involved.

Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you and your child are under no obligation to take part. You and your child are free to withdraw at any point before, during, or after the study (up until 31st August 2023 when data will be anonymised). All data collected will be kept confidential (as far as possible – as above) and used for research purposes only. It will be stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act.

Please see the inclusion and exclusion criteria below to see if your child may be eligible to take part:

Inclusion Criteria	**Exclusion Criteria**
To be a pupil in Key Stage 2 - 4	Have experienced significant trauma (e.g. Looked After Children, children on a foster placement, children with a special guardianship, children who have experienced a bereavement in the last 6 months)
To have English language proficiency (expressive and receptive) of Key Stage 2 level or above	Children who are currently under the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) or having therapy from a therapist
To have experienced working therapeutically (in any way) with a dog in school for at least 4	

weeks	

If you would like your child to participate in the research, please complete the consent form and return it to me by replying to my email. This can be signed electronically or printed, signed, and scanned.

Thank you for reading this information sheet and considering your child's participation. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me using the above contact details.

If you have any concerns or complaints about the study, please contact:
Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Research Participant Privacy Notice

Privacy information for Research Participants

For information about the University's obligations with respect to your data, who you can get in touch with and your rights as a data subject, please visit: www.nottingham.ac.uk/utilities/privacy/privacy.aspx.

Why we collect your personal data

We collect personal data under the terms of the University's Royal Charter in our capacity as a teaching and research body to advance education and learning. Specific purposes for data collection on this occasion are for a research study exploring children and young people's views and experiences of dogs supporting wellbeing in primary and secondary schools. Participants' interviews will be audio recorded and stored securely until 31st August 2023. After this date, recordings will have been anonymously (as far as possible) transcribed and recordings will be destroyed.

Legal basis for processing your personal data under GDPR

The legal basis for processing your personal data on this occasion is Article 6(1e) processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest.

How long we keep your data

The University may store your data for up to 25 years and for a period of no less than 7 years after the research project finishes. The researchers who gathered or processed the data may also store the data indefinitely and reuse it in future research. Measures to safeguard your stored data include: password protected storage of recordings with only the researcher having access, anonymisation of data, and destroying the recordings as soon as they are transcribed (by 31st August 2023).

Who we share your data with

Extracts of your data may be disclosed in published works that are posted online for use by the scientific community. Your data may also be stored indefinitely on external data repositories (e.g. the UK Data Archive) and be further processed for archiving purposes in the public interest, or for historical, scientific or statistical purposes. It may also move with the researcher who collected your data to another institution in the future.

Appendix 13: Information sheet for Children

Hello! My name is Kate, and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist.

I'm doing a project and I'd like to talk to you about it.

What's the project about?

I'd like to find out about your views and experiences of working with a dog in school.

Do I have to take part?

You can choose if you want to take part. If you say yes and then change your mind later on, you can stop taking part at any time.

What will happen if I take part?

If you want to take part, I will meet you at your school and I will ask you some questions about what you think about working with a dog in school. I will voice record our conversation and then I will write this up. Your name will not be on this and so nobody will know what you have said, unless you tell me something that suggests you may be in danger. In this case I would tell a member of staff at your school for your safety.

Thank you for reading this information and thinking about taking part. I hope I get to hear all about your views and experiences!

If you have any worries or questions, you can speak to .....

Appendix 14: Consent form for parents/carers

School of Psychology Consent Form

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Title of Project: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of Children & Young People's Experiences and Views of Dogs Supporting Wellbeing in Primary & Secondary Schools

Ethics Approval Number: S1515

Researcher(s): Kate Smith kate.smith@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor(s): Dr Mark Izzard-Snape mark.izzard-snape@nottingham.ac.uk

Please answer the following independently:

- Have you read and understood the Information Sheet? YES/NO
- Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study? YES/NO
- Have all your questions been answered satisfactorily (if applicable)? YES/NO
- I give my permission for my child to take part in a one-to-one interview and for this to be audio recorded. YES/NO
- I give permission for my child's data from this study to be shared with other researchers, provided that measures outlined in the information sheet have been taken to provide anonymity as far as possible. YES/NO
- Do you understand that you are free to withdraw your child from the study? (without giving a reason and any time up until 31st August 2023). YES/NO
- Do you agree that you are happy for your child to take part in this study? YES/NO

"This study has been explained to me to my satisfaction, and I agree that I am happy for my child to take part in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my child at any time up until 31st August 2023."

Child's name: …… Parent/Carer name: ……

Signature of the parent/carer:…… Date: ……..

I have explained the study to the above parent/carer, and they have agreed for their child to take part.

Signature of researcher: …… Date: ……..

Appendix 15: A Table to Show the Study's Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
To have experienced working therapeutically (in any way) with a dog in school for at least 4 weeks	Have experienced significant trauma (e.g. Looked After Children, children on a foster placement, children with a special guardianship, children who have experienced a bereavement in the last 6 months)
To be a pupil in Key Stage 2 - 4	Children who are currently under the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) or having therapy from a therapist
To have English language proficiency (expressive and receptive) of Key Stage 2 level or above	

Appendix 16: Debrief form shared with children and sent to parents

Debrief form for participants and their parents/carers

The University of Nottingham
UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Thank you for participating in my study.

Here is some information about the research I am undertaking:

Title: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of Children & Young People's Experiences and Views of Dogs Supporting Wellbeing in Primary & Secondary Schools

About the study: This study is exploring children and young people's views and experiences of working with dogs in schools to support any aspect of their wellbeing. Participants have completed an interview to explore their views and experiences of this. The goal of the study is to learn how to support schools implement this kind of intervention in the future.

Use of data: The voice recording data collected will be listened to by the researcher only and the researcher will transcribe these – as far as possible - anonymously. The transcripts will be used to explore and understand how and why working with dogs in schools can support pupil wellbeing.

Confidentiality: Your information will be stored confidentially and securely until 31st August 2023, before being anonymised. After this, information provided cannot be traced back to individuals. This means that data cannot be removed, so withdrawal from the process is not possible after anonymisation.

If you feel at all unsure or have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact the researcher or research supervisor with the details below.

	Researcher: Kate Smith	**Research Supervisor: Dr Mark Izzard-Snape**
Position	Postgraduate Researcher	Research Supervisor
Email address	kate.smith@nottingham.ac.uk	mark.izzard-snape@nottingham.ac.uk
Address	School of Psychology University of Nottingham University Park Campus East Drive Nottingham	School of Psychology University of Nottingham University Park Campus East Drive Nottingham
Postcode	NG7 2RD	NG7 2RD

If you have any concerns or complaints about the study, please contact:

Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)

stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix 17: Initial questionnaire for schools

Dogs Supporting Mental Health and Wellbeing in Schools 🐶🦮

Hello, my name is Kate - I'm in the 2nd year of my Doctorate in Applied Educational Psychology at the University of Nottingham and on placement in [redacted] Educational Psychology Service.

For my thesis research, I am hoping to explore how schools are using dogs to support pupils with their mental health and wellbeing. The purpose of this short questionnaire is for me to gain an understanding of a) which schools in [redacted] may be using dogs to support pupils and b) how schools are using dogs. This is to help me plan and prepare for my potential research. I would be very grateful for any responses.

The questions branch out depending on your response.

Thank you!

1. Does your school have a dog / dogs that are used to support pupils' mental health and wellbeing?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

2. How do pupils interact with the dog(s)?

- [ ] Reading to the dog
- [ ] Walking the dog
- [ ] Sitting with the dog
- [ ] Stroking/petting the dog
- [ ] The dog is a 'meet and greet' for pupils
- [ ] Doing tricks with the dog
- [ ] Other

3. Does your school have any other animals that are used to support pupils' mental health and wellbeing?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

4. What animal(s) do you have in school and how are they used?

5. What is the name of your school?

6. What type of provision is your school?

- ◯ Early Years
- ◯ Primary (Or Infants/Juniors)
- ◯ Secondary
- ◯ Specialist
- ◯ Alternative
- ◯ Post-16
- ◯ Other

7. If I go ahead with this research, would you be happy for me to contact you?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

8. Please provide your email address and phone number - thank you!

Appendix 18: Interview Schedule

Introductions and rapport building – go and meet the dog.
Show information sheet and go through this with the participant.
Explain what the interview will be like – I am interested to find out what you think about spending time with the dog in school… I will ask you some questions – there's no right or wrong answers as it is your experience and what you think. I will ask different questions based on your answers to try and understand your views and experiences. It might feel a bit weird at first but the more detail you can give the better – so you will probably be talking much more than I do.
Ask if they have any questions.
Gain verbal consent to take part.

RQ	Question	Prompts	Probes
What are children's perceptions of how school dogs affect their wellbeing? What are children's perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing?	Tell me about the dog.	• *What is his/her name?* • *Is it a male or female dog?* • *What colour is his/her fur? For someone who hasn't seen him/her, what does he/she look like?* • *What his/her personality like? Calm, excitable, playful, quiet, loud. How else would you describe him?* • *Where does he/she go in school?* • *What does he/she do in school?*	
	Can you tell me about spending time with the dog in school and what this is like?	• *For how long have you spent time with the dog/how often?* • *Why do you spend time with the dog in school? I was wondering if there was something you have found a bit tricky and whether this is why you spend time with the dog.. – reflect on what they have found tricky – how was this/how were you feeling/what thinking? What did this mean for you?* • *When do you spend time with the dog? Allocated time or as and when? A particular time? Whenever? – how do you know when it may be a good time to go and see the dog?* • *What do you do with the dog when you go and see him/her? – anything else? Where do you go with him/her? Is anyone else with*	What do you mean by X? What do X people do? What does X look like? Is being X important to you? Why? Anything else? What is that like? I can see you smiling when you say… What was that like?

		you? describe this to me.. how long, what do you do, what does the dog do/ what does someone else do? Talk me through the stages. • *Can you give me an example of when you spend time with the dog? Talk me through the moment you go from class to see the dog - Describe what it was like. If I was a fly on the wall.. what would I see… what would your facial expression look like? What would the other person's facial expression look like? How are you feeling? What are you thinking? Seeing, hearing, touching, smelling?* • *Can you give me another example when you spent time with the dog in a different way (e.g use different example given)?*	Describe.. What do you think they think about the dog?
What are children's perceptions of how school dogs affect their wellbeing?	Does spending time with the dog in school affect how you feel? In what ways does it affect how you feel? Does spending time with the dog affect how well you are doing? In what ways does it affect how well you are doing?	• *You mentioned you spend time with the dog because _____ and you mentioned you felt _____. Has spending time with the dog in school changed this feeling of _____? In what ways do you think spending time with the dog has changed how you feel? How much has this changed? How long does this different feeling last? Is it just during the time with the dog, or does this last after you've seen the dog? For how long? Is this difference in how you're feeling just whilst you're at school? Has spending time with the dog helped you in any other way – has anything changed?* • *When you are interacting with the dog (e.g. _____) how does this make you feel? what does that mean for you? (repeat for specific examples)* • *Can you give me an example of a time the dog has helped you? Describe this – If I was a fly on the wall what would I see - What did you do? What did the dog do?*	What do you mean by X? Describe.. What do X people do? What does X look like? Is being X important to you? Why? Thoughts/feelings Anything else?

	Imagine if your school did not have a dog, what would be different for you?	• *How do you think you would feel different?* • *What else would be different?* • *Why?*	What do you mean by X? What do X people do? What does X look like? Is being X important to you? Why?
	If there was a headteacher at a school thinking about getting a school dog but they weren't sure whether it would be a good idea – what would you say to them?	• *Why do you feel this may be a good idea? Why do you think this may be a bad idea?* • *You said you do X,Y,Z with the dog, which one of these would you say is your favourite thing to do with the dog? Why?*	
What are children's perceptions of why school dogs affect their wellbeing?	Why do you think spending time with the dog in school helps you?	• *What has been important to you about spending time with the dog? Why?* • *You said you do X, Y, Z with the dog, and this makes you feel XXXX, why do you think this is? What does the dog do? What is the dog like? How is the dog? If I was a fly on the wall.. what would I see the dog doing as you are doing this..? Would I be able to hear anything the dog is doing?* • *At the start, you said the dog is xxxxx, tell me about a time he/she showed this? What were you thinking? How did this make you feel?*	What do you mean by X? What do X people do? What does X look like? Is being X important to you? Why? What was it like?

Appendix 19: Example of section of IPA steps 1-3 for Kyle (exploratory noting and experiential statements)

(Blue highlight = Researcher speaking) normal font = descriptive codes; underlined font = linguistic codes; *italics font* = conceptual codes

Kyle, Participant 1 Interview Transcript	**Exploratory noting**	**Experiential statement**
R: So the first question is tell me about Barney		
P: He's very boisterous, energetic. Very loveable. You know, in simple terms.	Kyle perceives key characteristics of the dog are boisterous, energetic, and loveable. Emotive adjective. *Kyle has an emotional bond with the dog?* Use of very – Kyle has s*trong emotions towards the dog? The dog does not hold back on his feelings?* "Simple terms" – *suggesting there is much more to his experience than these words can describe?*	Has an emotional attachment with the dog. Perceives the dog to express feelings without holding back.
P: He's very sensitive about his paws and he doesn't like people touching them. I… I know from experience that I did try stroking him once and he can be a bit protective if you like, touch him and he can think you might be trying to… trying to harm him so he can nip.. attempts to nip sometimes, but other than that he's.. he's amazing.	Kyle thinks that the dog doesn't like people touching his paws. Repeated use of very – *the dog expresses his feelings in an overt way/through his perceivable actions? The dog doesn't hold back?* "can nip.. attempts to nip" change of wording – the dog can attempt to nip as a defence mechanism. *Kyle is showing empathy with the dog?* Kyle knows what the dog is thinking. *Why would the dog think people trying to harm him?* "other than that" – acknowledging some of the dog's flaws Kyle thinks the dog is amazing.	Can tell how the dog is feeling and what the dog is thinking based on the dog's actions. Has empathy towards the dog. Very fond of the dog despite some flaws.
R: Describe what he looks like.		
P: He's black, he's just lovely to see erm.. (pause) and if you took out a treat, he would just instantly sit. He would sit unless you told him down and then took out the treat then I think he just sits. I think every day after we go.. after we leave school, he goes in the	Kyle finds it lovely to see the dog. "just lovely to see" – *simplistic? Kyle doesn't have to do much – no/low demands? just seeing the dog has a positive emotional response.*	There are minimal/no demands when interacting with the dog which invokes a positive emotional response. The dog is reliable and predictable which brings a sense of comfort.

little round… he goes on like a walk around the grounds.	The dog will sit to get a treat. In response to what the dog looks like. *Kyle finds the dog is predictable. This may be comforting for him?* "instantly" – *the dog is eager to please people in order to get a treat.* The dog has a daily routine in the school and Kyle sees him during this routine. *The dog being walked after school is predictable? The dog is predictably there on a daily basis.*	
P: Erm… and erm… just after our break and our lunchtimes, he goes on a walk - a shorter walk after break and a longer walk after lunch or as we finish lunch.	Use of the pronouns "our" and "we" when referring to the dog's routine and how this relates to the school day. *Familiarity with the dog's routine in relation to his and his classmates'. Often thinking about the dog in relation to himself and his classmates.*	A sense of permanency and constancy which brings a sense of comfort.
R: Okay so what's different then if you are feeling mentally stable I think you said. P: If you're feeling more mentally stable then you can feel better about yourself. You don't beat yourself up as much. You feel your body health feels better as well. R: Yeah. And how about in school? Is anything different? If you're feeling mentally stable? P: erm yeah I find it easier to do lessons because the table I sit on for maths.. because we switch tables.. and the table I am sat on I find it really hard to concentrate. The people are always talking on them so I.. I generally just move to the focus table if I can it makes me concentrate a lot better.	For Kyle, feeling mentally stable allows him to feel better about himself and he is kinder to himself. He also feels that being mentally stable improves his physical health. *Improved self-esteem?* When Kyle is feeling mentally stable, he feels he is able to concentrate better at school.	Being emotionally regulated means improved self-esteem. Being emotionally regulated means improved concentration.
R: So does seeing Barney in school affect how you feel, and in what ways does it affect how you feel?	The dog makes Kyle feel happy and calm. "knowing" – present tense – *links to permanency and constancy? Attachment*	The school dog is like a best friend who loves and accepts you for who you are.

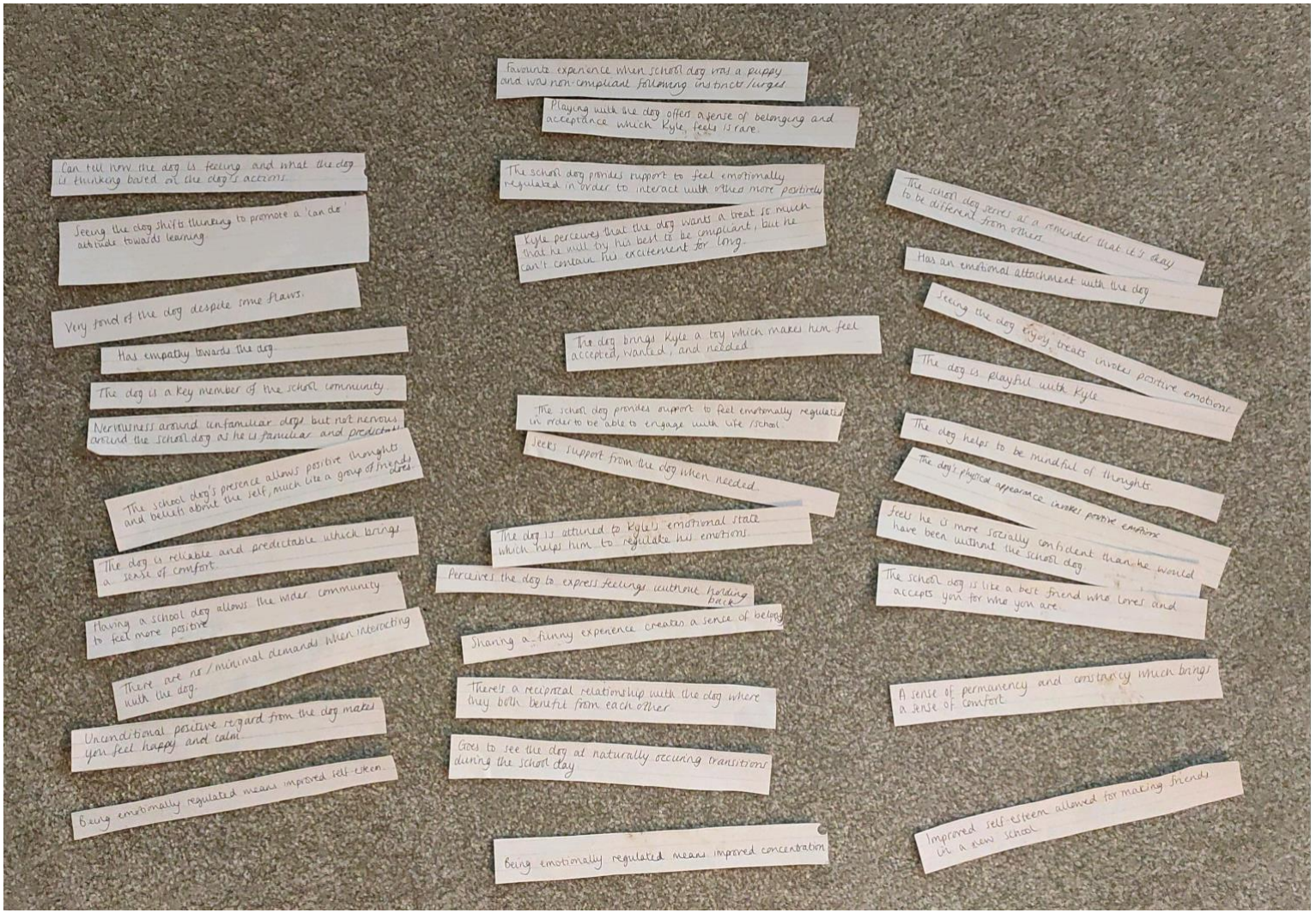
P: Erm it makes me feel happy also sometimes when you.. sometimes.. I feel happy, calm. Knowing that there's someone who does love me. As they say dogs are man's best friends. That's not always the case – some people train their dogs to be not very nice or some dogs just aren't very nice because of how their owners treat them.	*Kyle feels the dog accepts him? Unconditional positive regard?* Kyle likened someone loving him to a best friend. Referred to other dogs as not very nice in contrast to the school dog. Kyle thinks that nurture has an influence on a dog's temperament.	
R: So was Barney here when you started here? P: No he started when I was in my second year of being here. There were some not very nice people at my old school, not nice at all. R: Ah I'm sorry to hear that. Erm so you feel like your self-esteem has improved since seeing Barney. How much do you think that has changed? P: Erm.. probably.. (pause) on a scale of 1-10 I was probably at a 0. But now my self-esteem has sky-rocketed and I have friends now. I did have a small group of friends in year 3 but that was it I only had a small group of friends.	"sky rocketed" – referring to his self-esteem. *Why this metaphor? The difference in his self-esteem/social confidence/view of himself is so big it is out of this world? It feels alien to him? Kyle feels that his self-esteem has improved a great deal since meeting the dog.* Kyle feels he did not have friends at first, but he does now.	Improved self-esteem allowed for making friends in a new school. Vastly improved social confidence feels very new but in a good way.
R: So what does he do when he's just in the office?		
P: He just wanders about.. paws at Mrs Jones… and when children come and see him, he has some toys and he, like, brings them to you as if wanting you to, like, if it's a ball he might want you to just roll it in the office for him to get.	The dog greets Kyle and other children by bringing a toy. *Makes Kyle feel wanted and needed? Accepted? Sense of purpose?* Kyle thinks the dog wants Kyle/other children to play with him. The dog is playful. *The dog is also seeking a sense of purpose to retrieve the ball?*	The dog brings Kyle a toy which makes him feel accepted, wanted, and needed. The dog is playful with Kyle.

R: Ahh yes I noticed that when I met him, he brought me a toy. P: Yeah. But then.. he likes to be petted. (pause) erm and sometimes (laughs) Mrs Jones gives him cut up bits of cocktail sausage as a treat. R: Is that his favourite treat? P: I think so R: (laughs)	Kyle knows that the dog likes to be petted. Kyle thinks the dog's favourite treats are sausages. Laughter – *funny because it is human food? Funny because of how excited the dog seems for these treats?*	Seeing the dog enjoy treats invokes positive emotions.
R: Yeah and what do you do with Barney? P: Erm just stroke him, and play tug of war (pause) R: Okay. And what's that like? P: Nice. It makes me feel like I have a place in this world, but not many people do have a place. R: And what does that mean for you if you've got a place in the world? P: It means somebody accepts me. I don't know how to explain it... like... somebody accepts me.	Kyle strokes the dog and plays tug of war with him. Referring to the dog as "somebody" – *Kyle feels the dog has a soul or a personality.* Kyle feels like he has a place in the world when he strokes the dog and plays with him. Kyle feels that the dog accepts him for who he is. Kyle feels that t*he dog is non-judgemental and has unconditional positive regard?* Kyle feels that it is not common to have a place in the world. *Pessimistic view of the world – he thinks that most people don't fit in or aren't accepted.*	Playing with the dog offers a sense of belonging and acceptance which Kyle feels is rare.

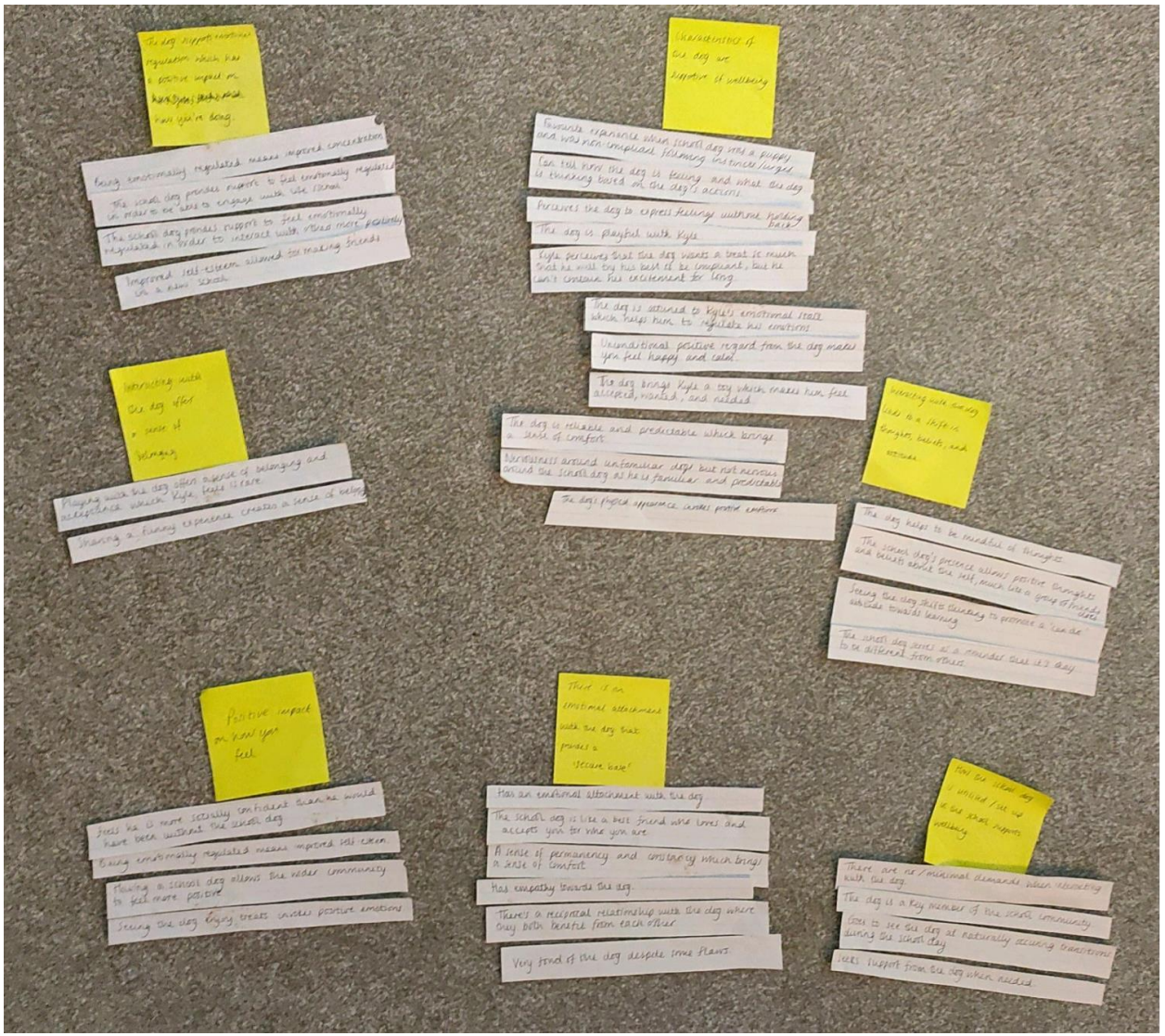
Appendix 20: Photos to show how I went about IPA step 4 – searching for connections across experiential statements

e.g.

Kyle's experiential statements ungrouped



The Researcher's Interpretation of Kyle's Experiential Statements Grouped (Personal Experiential Themes)



Appendix 21: A Table to show IPA step 5 – putting the Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) into a table for Participant 1 (Kyle)

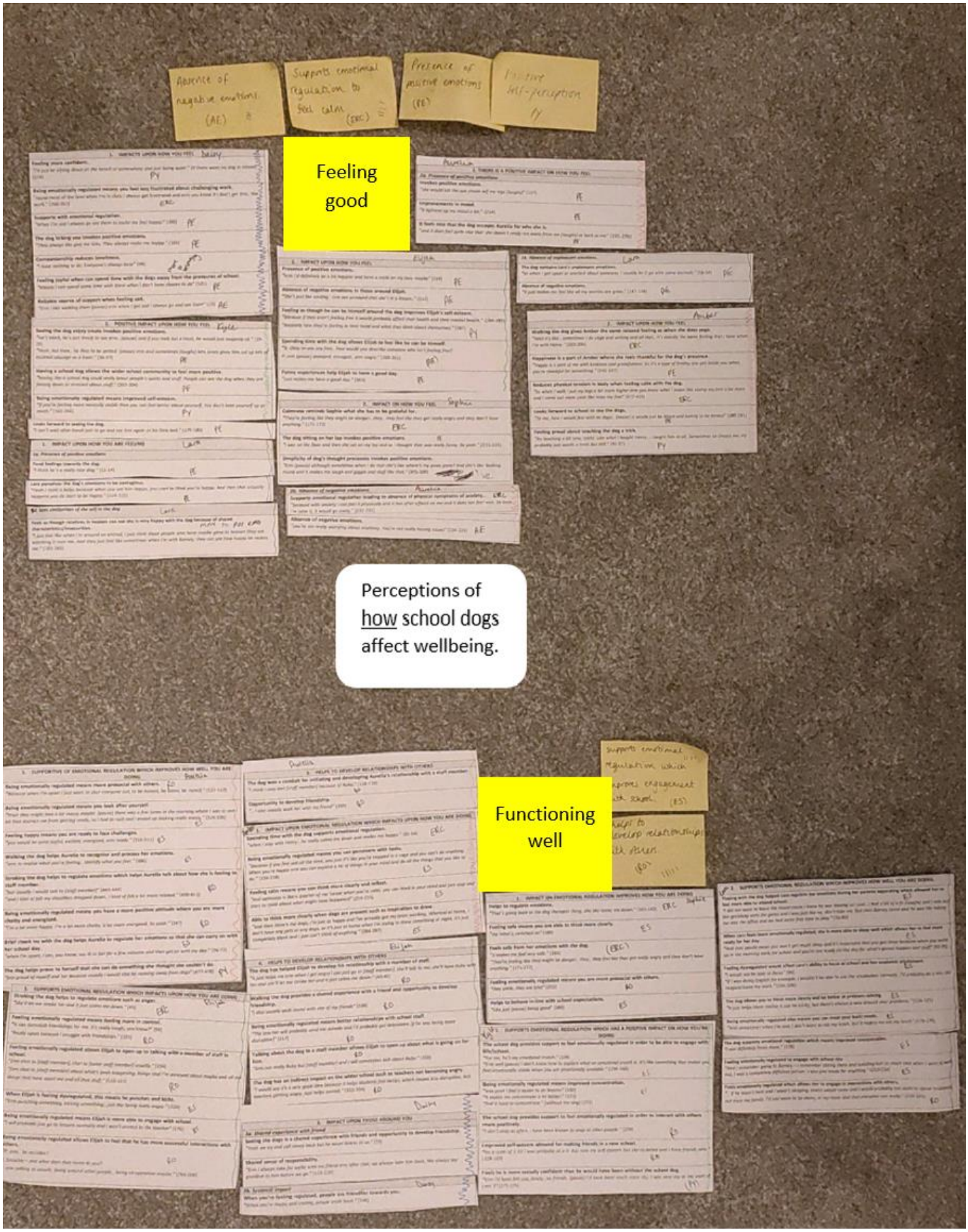
UPPERCASE BOLD = PETS; ***lowercase bold and italics = PET sub-themes (where appropriate)***
lowercase bold = experiential statements; *quotes from transcript with* line numbers

1. SUPPORTS EMOTIONAL REGULATION WHICH HAS A POSITIVE IMPACT ON HOW YOU'RE DOING
The school dog provides support to feel emotionally regulated in order to be able to engage with life/school. *"For me, he's my emotional crutch."* (156) *"Erm well (pause) I don't know how to explain what an emotional crutch is. It's like something that makes you feel emotionally stable when you are emotionally unstable."* (158-160)
Being emotionally regulated means improved concentration. *"erm yeah I find it easier to do lessons"* (169) *"it makes me concentrate a lot better*." (172) *"find it hard to concentrate." [without the dog]* (272)
The school dog provides support to feel emotionally regulated in order to interact with others more positively. *"I don't snap as often. I have been known to snap at other people."* (239)
Improved self-esteem allowed for making friends in a new school. ***"****on a scale of 1-10 I was probably at a 0. But now my self-esteem has sky-rocketed and I have friends now."* (228-229)
2. POSITIVE IMPACT UPON HOW YOU FEEL
Seeing the dog enjoy treats invokes positive emotions. ***"****He's black, he's just lovely to see erm.. (pause) and if you took out a treat, he would just instantly sit."* (19-20) ***"****Yeah. But then.. he likes to be petted. (pause) erm and sometimes (laughs) Mrs Jones gives him cut up bits of cocktail sausage as a treat."* (36-37)
Having a school dog allows the wider school community to feel more positive. ***"****having like a school dog could really boost people's spirits and stuff. People can see the dog when they are feeling down or stressed about stuff."* (303-304)
Being emotionally regulated means improved self-esteem. ***"****If you're feeling more mentally stable then you can feel better about yourself. You don't beat yourself up as much."* (165-166)
Vastly improved social confidence feels very new but in a good way. ***"****But now my self-esteem has sky-rocketed and I have friends now."* (228-229)
3. THE DOG OFFERS A SENSE OF BELONGING
Sharing a funny experience creates a sense of belonging. ***"****We all just found it quite hilarious*." (137)
Playing with the dog offers a sense of belonging and acceptance which Kyle feels is rare. ***"****Nice. It makes me feel like I have a place in this world, but not many people do have a place."* (123-124) ***"****It means somebody accepts me. I don't know how to explain it.. like.. somebody accepts me*." (126-127)
4. INTERACTING WITH THE DOG LEADS TO A SHIFT IN THOUGHTS, BELIEFS, AND ATTITUDE
The dog helps to be mindful of thoughts. *"I could tell you what I'm thinking if Barney was here right now."* (255-256)
Seeing the dog shifts thinking to promote a 'can do' attitude towards learning. ***"****After Barney came, I thought I could actually do my work"* (214-215)
The school dog's presence allows positive thoughts and beliefs about the self, much like a group of friends does. ***"****I had a huge group of friends in year 6.. like a huge one.. and erm since they left (pause) it's.. my self-esteem kind of dropped a bit but knowing Barney was there made me kind of keep it at a higher level."* (243-245)
The school dog serves as a reminder that it's okay to be different from others.

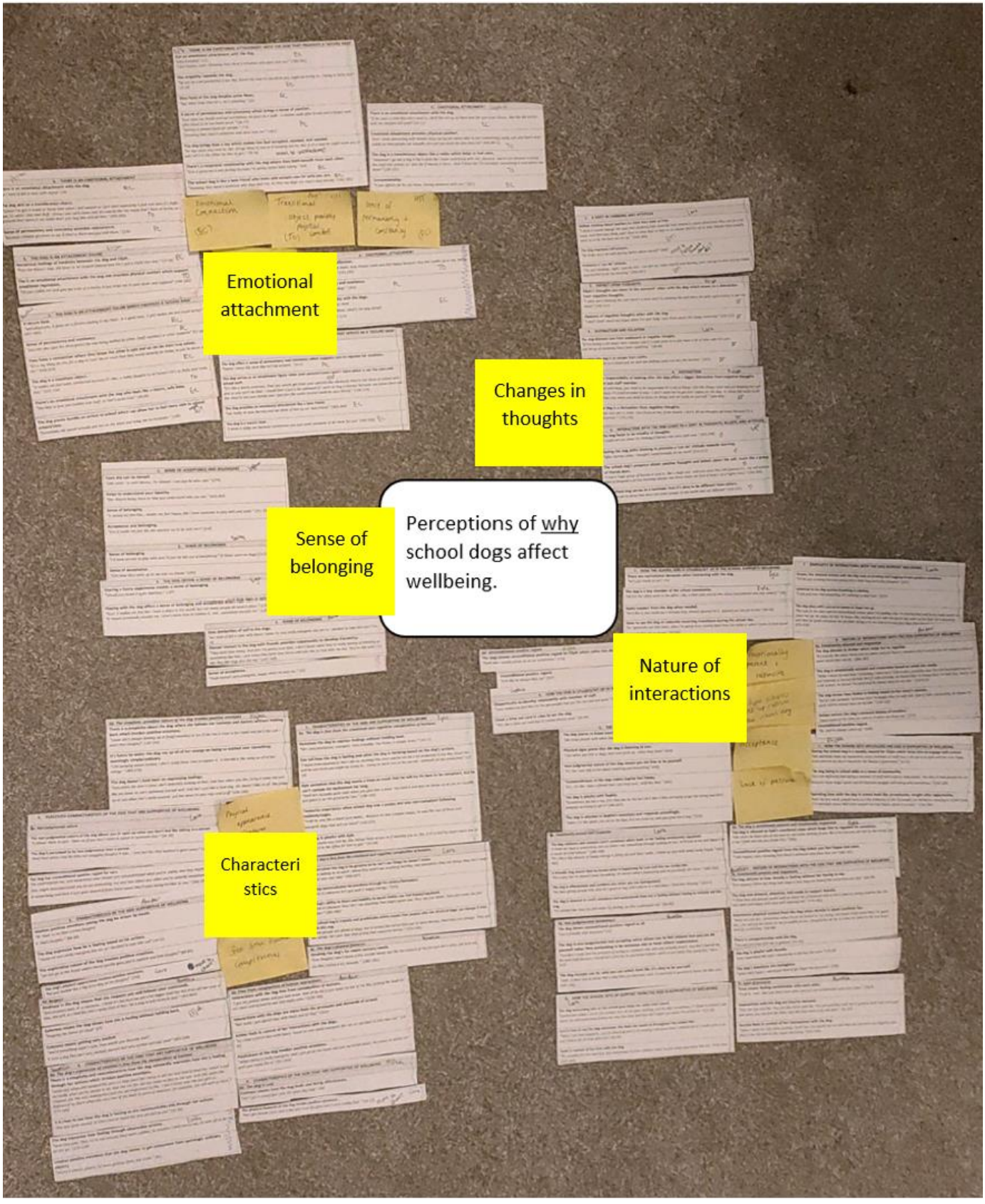
"it helps me to know that there are other people in this world that are different" (326-327)
5. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DOG ARE SUPPORTIVE OF WELLBEING
5a. The dog is free from the emotional and cognitive complexities of humans.
Perceives the dog to express feelings without holding back. *"He's very boisterous, energetic. Very loveable. You know, in simple terms."* (10-11)
Can tell how the dog is feeling and what the dog is thinking based on the dog's actions. *"I know from experience that I did try stroking him once and he can be a bit protective if you like, touch him and he can think you might be trying to… trying to harm him so he can nip.. attempts to nip sometimes"* (12-14)
Kyle perceives that the dog wants a treat so much that he will try his best to be compliant, but he can't contain his excitement for long. *"Well he's actually quite calm when you give him a treat. You hold it and then he jumps up at you so I usually just place it on the ground for him."* (100-101)
Favourite experience when school dog was a puppy and was non-compliant following instincts/urges. *"Yeah he was like a black furry bullet… Because he was a puppy puppy, he was like one of those over energetic dogs that will not listen"* (150-153)
The dog is playful with Kyle. *"he has some toys and he, like, brings them to you as if wanting you to, like, if it's a ball he might want you to just roll it in the office for him to get."* (33-34)
5b. The dog is emotionally present and emotionally responsive
The dog is attuned to Kyle's emotional state which helps him to regulate his emotions. *"Like when he hears you at the door he can come running at you. But if he sees you are sad he like brings you a toy I think and lets you stroke him."* (343)
Unconditional positive regard from the dog makes you feel happy and calm. **"**I feel happy, calm. Knowing that there's someone who does love me" (180-181)
The dog brings Kyle a toy which makes him feel accepted, wanted, and needed. *"he has some toys and he, like, brings them to you as if wanting you to, like, if it's a ball he might want you to just roll it in the office for him to get."* (33-34)
5c. Reliability and predictability of the dog
The dog is reliable and predictable which brings a sense of comfort. *"if you took out a treat, he would just instantly sit. He would sit unless you told him down and then took out the treat then I think he just sits. I think every day after we go.. after we leave school, he goes in the little round… he goes on like a walk around the grounds."* (19-22)
Nervousness around unfamiliar dogs but not nervous around the school dog as he is familiar and predictable. **"***Ah no this was last year, it's just dogs I don't know."* (92)
5d. The physical appearance of the dog
The dog's physical appearance invokes positive emotions. **"***Erm well (pause) his ears. His ears are just too big (laughs). I think that's it. His ears make him the perfect school dog."* (323-324)
6. THERE IS AN EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT WITH THE DOG THAT PROVIDES A 'SECURE BASE'
Has an emotional attachment with the dog. *"very loveable"* (11) *"I feel happy, calm. Knowing that there's someone who does love me."* (180-181)
Has empathy towards the dog. *"he can be a bit protective if you like, touch him and he can think you might be trying to… trying to harm him"* (13-14)
Very fond of the dog despite some flaws. *"but other than that he's.. he's amazing."* (15)
A sense of permanency and constancy which brings a sense of comfort.

"just after our break and our lunchtimes, he goes on a walk - a shorter walk after break and a longer walk after lunch or as we finish lunch." (26-27) *"Barney is always there for people."* (72) *"Knowing that there's someone who does love me*." (181)
There's a reciprocal relationship with the dog where they both benefit from each other. *"Erm it gives me a nice feeling because I'm giving rather than taking."* (94)
The school dog is like a best friend who loves and accepts you for who you are. *"Knowing that there's someone who does love me. As they say dogs are man's best friends."* (181-182)
7. HOW THE SCHOOL DOG IS UTILISED/SET UP IN THE SCHOOL SUPPORTS WELLBEING
There are no/minimal demands when interacting with the dog. *"he's just lovely to see"* (19)
The dog is a key member of the school community. *"He's in the office yeah in the office. Like, a little area next to Mrs Jones [receptionist and dog owner]."* (30)
Seeks support from the dog when needed. *"He's like a, you could say a therapy dog. Almost. (pause) He's.. (pause) you can go to him"* (45-46)
Goes to see the dog at naturally occurring transitions during the school day. *"or I generally see him most, when I'm going to or coming back from the toilet or when I come in from break or just before we go home."* (61-63)

Appendix 22a: Development of Group Experiential Themes (GETs) RQ1



Appendix 22b: Development of Group Experiential Themes (GETs) RQ2



Appendix 23a: The Prevalence of Each Group Experiential Theme (GET) Across Participants for RQ1

Group Experiential Theme	Group Sub-theme	Contributing participants
Feeling good	Presence of positive emotions	Kyle, Lara, Elijah, Aurelia, Sophie, Amber, Daisy
	Absence of negative emotions	Lara, Elijah, Aurelia, Daisy
	Supportive of emotional regulation which leads to a calm state	Elijah, Aurelia, Sophie, Amber
	Positive self-perception	Kyle, Elijah, Aurelia, Amber, Daisy
Functioning well	Supportive of emotional regulation which improves engagement with school	Kyle, Lara, Elijah, Aurelia, Sophie, Amber
	Supportive of developing relationships with others	Kyle, Lara, Elijah, Aurelia, Sophie, Daisy

Appendix 23b: The Prevalence of Each Group Experiential Theme (GET) Across Participants for RQ2

Group Experiential Theme	Group Sub-Theme	Contributing participants
Emotional attachment	Emotional connection	Kyle, Lara, Elijah, Aurelia, Sophie, Amber, Daisy
	Transitional object providing comfort and security	Lara, Elijah, Aurelia, Sophie, Amber, Daisy
	Sense of permanency and constancy	Kyle, Lara, Aurelia, Amber, Daisy
Sense of belonging	N/A	Kyle, Sophie, Amber, Daisy
Characteristics of school dogs	Free from human complexities	Kyle, Lara, Elijah, Aurelia, Sophie, Amber, Daisy
	Physical appearance and features	Kyle, Lara, Elijah, Aurelia
Nature of interactions with school dogs	Lack of pressure	Kyle, Lara, Aurelia, Amber
	Acceptance	Kyle, Lara, Elijah, Aurelia, Amber, Daisy

	Emotionally attuned and responsive	Kyle, Lara, Aurelia, Sophie, Amber
	How the school utilises the dog	Kyle, Lara, Elijah, Sophie
Changes in thoughts	N/A	Kyle, Lara, Elijah, Aurelia

Appendix 24a: A Table to Show Group Experiential Themes and Group Sub-Themes for RQ1

Each GET is presented in **UPPERCASE BOLD**, and each group-level sub-themes in **lower case bold**. Examples of key phrases from contributing participants, and associated line numbers are also presented.

FEELING GOOD
Presence of positive emotions
"*Yeah. But then.. he likes to be petted. (pause) erm and sometimes (laughs) Mrs Jones gives him cut up bits of cocktail sausage as a treat."* (Kyle, 36-37) **"***Yeah I think it helps because when you see him happy, you start to think you're happy. And then that actually happens you do start to be happy."* (Lara, 154-155) **"***erm I'd definitely be a bit happier and have a smile on my face maybe"* (Elijah, 214) *"she would lick the sun cream off my legs (laughs)"* (Aurelia, 137) *"I was on the floor and then she sat on my lap and so I thought that was really funny. So yeah."* (Sophie, 215-216) *"Happy is a part of me with kindness and gratefulness. So it's a type of feeling you get inside you when you're thankful for something."* (Amber, 145-147) *"They always like give me licks. They always make me happy."* (Daisy, 165)
Absence of negative emotions
"*it just makes me feel like all my worries are gone."* (Lara, 147-148) **"***She's [peer who also sees the dog] just like smiling.. erm not annoyed that she's in a lesson.."* (Elijah, 212) *"you're not really worrying about anything. You're not really having issues"* (Aurelia, 224-225) *"When I'm sad I always go see them."* (Daisy, 180)
Supportive of emotional regulation which leads to a calm state
"*she'll let me stroke her and it just calms me down."* (Elijah, 45) *"because with anxiety I can feel it physically and it has after effects on me and it does not feel nice. So once I'm calm it, it would go away."* (Aurelia, 233-235) **"***That's going back to the dog therapist thing. She like calms me down."* (Sophie, 142-143) *"So when I walk I put my legs a bit more higher erm you know what I mean like stomp my feet a bit more and I come out more calm like relax my feet"* (Amber, 417-419)
Positive self-perception
"*If you're feeling more mentally stable then you can feel better about yourself. You don't beat yourself up as much."* (Kyle, 165-166) **"***Because if they aren't feeling free it would probably affect their health and their mental health (…) Basically how they're feeling in their head and what they think about themselves."* (Elijah, 284-285, 287) *"feel proud of myself and her because usually I would also be running away from dogs"* (Aurelia, 477-478)

"try teaching a bit new, tricks. Like what I taught Henry.. I taught him to sit. Sometimes he chases me. He probably just wants a treat but still." (Amber, 95-97)

"I'd just be sitting down on the bench or somewhere and just being quiet." [if there were no dog in school] (Daisy, 214)

FUNCTIONING WELL

Supportive of emotional regulation which improves engagement with school

"For me, he's my emotional crutch (…) Erm well (pause) I don't know how to explain what an emotional crutch is. It's like something that makes you feel emotionally stable when you are emotionally unstable." (Kyle, 156, 158-160)

"*I did not want to leave the house cause I knew he [Dad] was leaving so I just.. I had a bit of a fit (laughs) and I was just like grabbing onto the gates and I was just like no, don't take me. But then [school dog] came and he was like taking me into the office and we had some free time to play."* (Lara, 76-80)

"*I will probably just go to lessons normally and I won't protest to the teacher"* (Elijah, 176)

"when I'm upset, I can, you know, say hi to her for a few minutes and then get on with my day." (Aurelia, 76-77)

"my mind is switched on" (Sophie, 189)

"and then there's the dogs, I'm just so happy and I've actually got my brain working. Whereas at home, I don't have any pets or any dogs, so it's just at home when I'm trying to draw something at night, it's just completely blank and I just can't think of anything." (Amber, 284-287)

Supportive of developing relationships with others

"I don't snap as often. I have been known to snap at other people." (Kyle, 239)

"*.. if he wasn't here and I wasn't sleeping, stress would come and I would probably not want to speak to anyone, not even my family. I'd just want to be alone, in my room and shut everyone out really."* (Lara, 319-321)

"*Erm chat to [staff member], chat to [same staff member] usually (…) Erm chat to [staff member] about what's been happening, things that I'm annoyed about maybe and all the things that have upset me and all that stuff."* (Elijah, 106, 110-111)

"I'm a lot more happy, I'm a lot more chatty, a lot more energised. So yeah." (Aurelia, 247)

"they [people who are feeling emotionally regulated] smile, they are kind" (Sophie, 255)

"Yeah ***we*** *try and call Henry back but he never listens to us."* (Daisy, 73)

Appendix 24b: A Table to Show Group Experiential Themes and Group Sub-Themes for RQ2

Each GET is presented in **UPPERCASE BOLD**, and each group-level sub-themes in **lower case bold**. Examples of key phrases from contributing participants, and associated line numbers are also presented.

EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT
Emotional connection
"Knowing that there's someone who does love me. As they say dogs are man's best friends." (Kyle, 181-182) *"I think it helps me because sometimes you just need someone to be there for you"* (Lara, 349-350) *"Erm she doesn't bite, she loves to be stroked (pause) and she's just a really nice dog."* (Elijah, 17-18) *"well physically, it gives me a fluttery feeling in my chest.. in a good way.. it just makes me feel much better"* (Aurelia, 491-492) *"if she sees a child that she's used to, she'll like run up to them and like surround them.. like she did earlier with me (laughs) but yeah"* (Sophie, 10-11) *"so I kind of fell in love with Henry"* (Amber, 14) *"P: I like giving fusses to them* *R: So if you're fussing them, what's the dog doing?* *P: They're happy"* (Daisy, 221-223)
Transitional object providing comfort and security
"It's like a warm embrace. That you would get from your parents but obviously they're not there at school with you so you can't do that. I would find it just a bit awkward if I went to hug a teacher because you know them but like they're not your family and I just feel like every animal could be your family." (Lara, 216-219) *"I'd just cuddle her and give her a bit of a stroke, it just helps me to calm down and regulate"* (Elijah, 164-165) *"It makes me feel calm, comforted because it's like.. a teddy (laughs) to be honest she's so fluffy and really nice."* (Aurelia, 153-154) *"whenever I go see a dog it like it feels like I have something with me.. because we're not allowed to bring like stuff into school, so I feel like if Moose is there.. then it feels like I've brought something in that calms me down"* (Sophie, 150-152) *"'cause I've got a teddy at home that when I feel wound up I just start squeezing it and erm then it's fluffy too. So when I feel that fluff, I know I can calm down and it's exactly like the teddy that I have at home, so I pretend that Henry is my teddy and I just hug him and all that."* (Amber, 395-399) *"Ohh, erm whenever I see them, they always make you feel happy because they like cuddle up to me, Henry always jumps up to me."* (Daisy, 232-233)
Sense of permanency and constancy
"just after our break and our lunchtimes, he goes on a walk - a shorter walk after break and a longer walk after lunch or as we finish lunch (…) Barney is always there for people." (Kyle, 26-27, 72) *"Cause I know the next day he'll be around.."* (Lara, 112)

"you can also spot her throughout the day being walked by either [staff member] or other students" (Aurelia, 57-58)

"because I always go down to see if they're there and just visit them." (Amber, 279)

"Be thinking about the dogs." (Daisy, 263)

SENSE OF BELONGING

"Nice. It makes me feel like I have a place in this world, but not many people do have a place." (Kyle, 123-124)

"Erm it made me feel like she wanted me to be with her?" (Sophie, 218)

"They both love Henry. And erm I'm pretty sure that.. I don't know what they're really feeling of thinking or something like that. I just know they both love Henry and also like to stay with me too. They're like well.. I'd say they like dogs just like me." (Amber, 247-249)

"Erm how they come up to me and my friend." (Daisy, 292)

CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOL DOGS

Free from human complexities

"I know from experience that I did try stroking him once and he can be a bit protective if you like, touch him and he can think you might be trying to… trying to harm him so he can nip.. attempts to nip sometimes" (Kyle, 12-14)

"I think it's because they can't say anything that might upset you. They can just listen. Then just make me feel happier." (Lara, 295-296)

"cause she's always looking up at [staff member] to see if she has a treat in her hand and she's like ooh I want that (laughs)" (Elijah, 133-134)

"yesterday when she escaped the year 11 boys were like trying to pet her and kind of feed her, which is just not really what you're meant to do. And she ran like she ran away as fast as she can. And still, when she stopped, she like was shaking because she got frightened by the.. I don't know why she just gets so frightened by them when she sees one of the head of years or teachers, for example, she will bark at them." (Aurelia, 575-580)

"I was on the floor and then she sat on my lap and so I thought that was really funny. So yeah" (Sophie, 215-216).

"I put my jumper down and just laid down. And all he did is just come on top of me like, putting his head on my chest and all and he was just really calm." (Amber, 129-130)

"Henry is always playful, he loves getting sticks, big sticks." (Daisy, 42)

Physical appearance and features

"Erm well (pause) his ears. His ears are just too big (laughs). I think that's it. His ears make him the perfect school dog." (Kyle, 323-324)

"He's got brown eyes, and a big wet nose (laughs) and a very smiley face." (Lara, 16-17)

"She's got a round face erm she gives big hugs" (Elijah, 26)

"erm (laughs) I don't know if this sounds weird, but like the texture of her fur and she's when she licks me, she likes licking a lot, actually." (Aurelia, 180-181)

NATURE OF INTERACTIONS WITH SCHOOL DOGS

Lack of pressure

*"he's **just** lovely to see"* (Kyle, 19)

***"**I can **just** hear him breathing. It's calming to hear him."* (Lara, 237)

*"You can run with her. You can play fetch with her. You can **just** play with her in general with toys and stuff and yeah, you can give her belly rubs she likes them a lot and yeah."* (Aurelia, 41-43)

*"so I kind of fell in love with Henry 'cause he was really energetic like me so **I decided to** take him out*." (Amber, 14-15)

Acceptance

"Erm (pause) cause it helps me to know that there are other people in this world that are different." (Kyle, 326-327)

"he understands me, and sometimes your friends can misunderstand what you're saying and they might say like they might misunderstand you to say something not very nice about you when you're actually complimenting them or something and then it just goes downhill from there cause they'll start being horrible to you." (Lara, 366-370)

"Yeah she usually jumps up at me sometimes." (Elijah, 116)

"You don't really feel the pressure of acting as someone else who you actually aren't. You don't feel all the lies and stuff because I would tell a few lies to you know impress which is not really that great but." (Aurelia, 611-613)

"So.. and he always comes up." (Amber, 410)

"Erm like he always likes me" (Daisy, 237)

Emotionally attuned and responsive

"Like when he hears you at the door he can come running at you. But if he sees you are sad he like brings you a toy I think and lets you stroke him." (Kyle, 343)

***"**He runs to the door and he immediately knows what I'm feeling, why I'm feeling that and he he really wants to cheer me up. He wags his tail, he keeps like, looking at me with this great big smile on his face. He's beaming and then he grabs whatever he can find, brings it to me and so he can just have that time to be happy and play."* (Lara, 375-378)

"Well, she can tell.. sometimes when I'm at my lowest or I'm crying, she could really sense that I'm upset.. like.. she will put her paws on me or cuddle on me.. (laughs) Go on me to show me that it's OK and that's kind of comforting." (Aurelia, 66-68)

"Like when you talk to dogs, their ears prick up.. when they listen" (Sophie, 459)

"What I mean by sees how I'm feeling, I mean by if I talk louder, probably sees I'm a bit frustrated that he's not listening to me and all that. But if I talk normally, he knows that I'm happy that I'm with him. And if I talk a bit quieter, he knows I'm upset and he always stays by my side." (Amber, 119-122)

How the school utilises the dog
"or I generally see him most, when I'm going to or coming back from the toilet or when I come in from break or just before we go home." (Kyle, 61-63) *"sometimes when I come into school, he's at the gate waiting, and he also sometimes, if I come to school a bit upset, he will sometimes follow me into the class and then he's taken out when I'm settled in."* (Lara, 22-25) *"she definitely helps me sometimes cause [member of staff] says I can go on a walk with her erm Friday lunch and erm as like a reward for me having a good week."* (Elijah, 9-11) *"it's like a time out card but it's called [dog's name] card."* (Sophie, 65-66)
CHANGES IN THOUGHTS
"I could tell you what I'm thinking if [school dog] was here right now." (Kyle, 255-256) *"It feels like I'm on a cloud just me and him drifting away out into the horizon."* (Lara, 241) *"I don't think about my anger when I'm with [school dog] I just think about the happy memories"* (Elijah, 220-221) *"well with [school dog], you need to be responsible for a lot of things. Like the things I said and just keeping her safe because it's [staff member's] dog – I don't want her to get hurt. Safety for the dog. So those like tasks could distract you when you need to focus on things and not really on yourself."* (Aurelia, 404-408)