



Disadvantaged Youth's Subjective Experiences on the Impact of a Dog Training Intervention: A South African Exploration

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Introduction

Dog Training Intervention (DTI) studies with children and adolescents have demonstrated improvements in social and emotional development, as well as a decrease in problematic behaviours, such as aggression. A DTI is a type of therapeutic intervention which focuses on children assisting in the training of dogs. Disadvantaged youth in SA are at risk of being exposed to violence and anti-social peer groups and the use of a DTI could help reduce problematic behaviours and promote more prosocial behaviours.

Researchers have only recently started studying DTIs and Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) as interventions. Although the existing literature focuses more on AATs than DTIs, both of these types of AAI have been evaluated by studies done in high-income countries, therefore it is unknown if DTIs will have similar effects in a low- to middle-income country (LMIC), specifically within disadvantaged communities where poverty and crime are more prevalent. Additionally, only a few studies focused on at-risk youth where factors like prosociality and externalising behaviours may show different results in at-risk youth of SA. DTIs are more feasible and accessible for LMICs because they do not require trained therapy dogs like AAT, which can be expensive. Therefore, studying the Underdog DTI in a South African context could contribute to paediatric interventions, child development, and address the literature gap.

The Underdog DTI was evaluated by looking at the experiences of graduate participants at the Underdog organisation. This study aimed to contribute to the literature on DTI in LMICs, specifically focusing on disadvantaged youth in SA. We sought to obtain a sense of the lived experience of graduate participants of the Underdog DTI, to gain a more in-depth understanding of the program's impact, and to understand if the Underdog DTI is able to assist in the positive development of disadvantaged youth.

Method

This study was done using a qualitative approach. The aim of this study as mentioned above, is to obtain an in-depth understanding of disadvantaged youth's experiences of the Underdog DTI. Therefore, using a qualitative approach is useful to get an account of the participants' experiences. Semi-structured interviews were completed with 6 graduate participants at the Underdog organisation. Participants were interviewed individually in person by the Principal Investigator (PI) via semi-structured interviews. All COVID-19 measures and precautions were taken to ensure the safety of all participants. The study explored to what extent the Underdog DTI impacted the participants in terms of their self-esteem, empathy, behaviour, and life skills they may have gained. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interviews.

Findings and Discussion

Four overarching themes were identified that described the experiences of past graduates at Underdog. These are a sense of belonging; prosociality; positive change in beliefs and behaviour; and self-improvement.

The thematic analysis helped to identify the overarching themes that were common across participants. The themes highlight some of the needs that social exclusion threatens. Findings suggest that the Underdog DTI works to restore these needs, including belongingness, meaningful existence, self-esteem, and empowerment.

- **Sense of belonging**

Findings suggested that a sense of belonging came with a sense of security and comfort and being able to speak about your feelings knowing that you are not being judged. Disadvantaged youth suggested that they felt included and were a part of something bigger at Underdog. The Underdog DTI not only provided youth with a space where they felt included, but also provided them with a sense of security. The findings suggested that disadvantaged youth felt that Underdog provided them with a safe and secure space, which they lacked within their community.

- **Prosociality**

Participants were unaccustomed to the concept of openness, as they were used to not being able to express their feelings at home. Children from disadvantaged communities might feel that their problems are small compared to their parents so they suppress their feelings. Participating in Underdog provided opportunities for them to express their feelings and to seek help when they needed to. The Underdog environment was non-judgemental, and participants felt that they could be themselves and were unafraid to make mistakes or to be vulnerable.

The Underdog DTI social skills exercises promoted **sharing your feelings** and problems. Participants felt more comfortable sharing their feelings which assisted in building relationships with others. Another activity that helped participants build bonds was that they had to work in groups when training dogs, so participants learnt that in order to train the dog effectively they had to work as a team.

- **Positive change in beliefs and behaviour**

Participants' **treatment towards dogs** changed drastically after joining the Underdog DTI. They were able to change the beliefs they had of dogs being dangerous and were able to overcome their fear of dogs. It was evident that participants started treating dogs in a more humane way, through how they acknowledged that dogs have feelings and by taking the dogs' wellbeing into consideration. They did not just learn how to treat dogs, but their interactions with the dogs also taught them **values such as love, kindness, and respect for others** as well as how to remain calm in volatile situations. Additionally, participants learnt how body language revealed dogs or people's feelings and emotions. Findings suggest that participants refrained from joining antisocial peers and engaging in risky behaviours. Instead, they revealed a desire to contribute and improve the community for future generations. Additionally, they were willing to identify unethical behaviour, especially when it involved dogs.

- **Self-improvement**

Underdog DTI promoted **empowerment** among the participants, with them either having the courage to overcome their fears or actively wanting to make better choices in their lives. Participants in the study displayed **emotional awareness, improved confidence and goal-directed behaviours**. These findings suggested that the Underdog DTI promotes the improvement of self-esteem and provides participants with more opportunities for growth and empowerment. Participants were more aware of their emotions and were able to manage their emotions more effectively. The Underdog DTI gave participants the confidence to take on leadership positions and be more outspoken. It also empowered them to set more ambitious future goals and to persevere, even when making a mistake.

The themes found in the lived experiences of the disadvantaged youth provide an overlap with the existing literature, offering more depth of understanding in the area of DTIs, specifically through a qualitative lens. This builds on existing literature by providing a South African account of the impact DTIs have on disadvantaged communities, which is consistent with existing literature. The results of this study could help promote the use of DTIs in LMICs, as it shows that DTIs are an effective intervention for South African youth. The study also aids in understanding disadvantaged youth, and how DTIs could be helpful in improving their development.

Recommendations for the Underdog Project

These are some of the recommendations that participants of the study gave us.

- One of the recommendations was for the project to be expanded to other parts of Cape Town and later throughout South Africa.
- Participants also recommended expanding the number of children that were taken into the project.
- Lastly was to increase social media presence in order to enlighten people and children about the project and how it is helping the community and shelter dogs.



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