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Case Studies

Harnessing horses in social pedagogy: Equine-assisted social education in a school context

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Abstract

This article introduces a school-based social pedagogical programme using horses to support pupils' educational development, social and emotional skills and self-esteem. These are essential for pupils' well-being, to reduce the risk of developing emotional disorders in youth and later life. In terms of academic outcomes, these social-emotional skills, character strengths and health benefits are recognised in the Finnish educational agenda. Equine-assisted social education (EASE) differs from recreational riding programs by its frame of reference in social pedagogy and in the human–equine bond it features, positioning horses as co-educators to improve interaction and collaboration. This human–equine communication supports both human and equine welfare if applied with attention, respect and empathy. Furthermore, the stables environment provides a setting for enhancing the pedagogical relationship and trust between pupils and their teacher. This equine activity practice, like other educational interventions, has physical, behavioural, social and emotional intentions. In addition, as social pedagogy is a complex and innovative discipline, EASE represents a ground-breaking practice within this discipline. The purpose is to respond to individual and social difficulties with preventive and problem-solving practice. As Finnish social pedagogy emphasises educational dialogue and communication, EASE facilitates non-verbal communication and positive behaviour. Additionally, it consists of factors improving collaboration through experiences, activities and dialogue.

Keywords: equine-assisted social education; social pedagogy; well-being; pedagogical relationship; intervention

Introduction

Equine-assisted social pedagogy is an approach for social pedagogical work developed in Finland. Its starting point came in a pilot course organised in 2002 for 22 participants working in social services, health or education. Today this approach is known nationwide in Finland, with three universities providing such education. This article introduces equine-assisted social pedagogy to a broader social pedagogical audience outside of Finland. It concentrates on how this intervention is practiced, especially in school contexts. Schools in Finland make suitable settings for this practice, as the Finnish national curriculum emphasises participation, involvement and engagement (Opetushallitus, 2014), and local curricula encourage teachers to be creative in developing innovative activities to address these issues (Espoon OPS, 2016). Positive and effective interventions at the critical adolescent age improve ‘at-risk’ youths’ emotional growth (Ewing et al., 2007). On that account, the school system emphasises flexible and preventive support and actions (Vainikainen et al., 2015; Hotulainen and Takala, 2014). Equality and social inclusion can be enhanced by reducing the risk of exclusion (Sabel et al., 2010).

To answer children’s and adolescents’ increasing social exclusion the Equestrian Federation of Finland organised a project in 2002 with the University of Kuopio, supported by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Koistinen, 2005). The final report of this project indicated that the stables environment was widely used to prevent social exclusion in Finland (Koistinen, 2005). This outcome exposed the need for an equine-assisted social pedagogy concept and network around the country. There were already professionals with equine competence working in education, social or health services utilising horses in their work; implementing a social pedagogical approach united theory and practice, and a pilot course was established to provide a frame of reference for various projects (Koistinen, 2003). This pilot course was created and marketed as a ‘pedagogical riding programme’. Equine activities and the stables environment were used as additional tools to implement a social orientation in this approach. Therefore, the practice was in 2003 renamed ‘equine-assisted social pedagogy’ (Okulov and Koukkari, 2005).

Equine-assisted social pedagogy implements holistic and cooperative exercises to integrate clients first of all into the stables community, and later – step by step – into society. As the main purpose of equine-assisted social pedagogy is to strengthen participants’ connectedness and social inclusion (Koistinen, 2005), this practice differs from alternative animal-assisted interventions. For example, riding therapy (RT) primarily adopts an individual rehabilitation approach, via a team consisting of horse and therapist (Suomen Ratsastusterapeutit ry., n.d.), while the social pedagogical framework focuses on preventing social exclusion and enhancing social growth and well-being through interaction, experimental practice and support for belonging (Sosiaalipedagoginen Hevostoimintayhdistys ry., n.d.). As shown already in an early collection of articles written by trained equine-assisted social pedagogy practitioners, this intervention has benefited groups with versatile needs: those with social problems, learning problems or alienation, and children and young people in custody or experiencing substance abuse (Okulov and Koukkari, 2005).

Despite being implemented in diverse forms and recognised in Finland today, equine-assisted social pedagogy has been subject to little academic research. To address this gap, I am writing my doctoral thesis about the approach. The thesis is based on research that compares three pedagogical interventions, one of them being equine-assisted social pedagogy, and their effects on special needs pupils’ well-being. The thesis will be in English, and I am aiming for completion in 2019. This article is related to the thesis but will not present the results of the research. Instead, it introduces one way of utilising social pedagogical activities with horses in a school context, to reassert relatedness and belonging.

Equine-assisted social pedagogy

Equine-assisted activities are practised in diverse settings and with varying clients. The stables environment provides vital elements for human well-being, like coherent actions, genuine human–equine interaction and a sense of community. These elements are recognised in other equine-assisted interventions, but in social pedagogy they are used in a special way: ‘The horse offers a peak experience, perhaps unmatched by any other, with a totally unique physical experience while in a joyous social environment’ (Hart, 2000, p. 94). Around the world stables are recognised as holistic educational communities providing

a sense of community and social growth, and correcting existing harm. Cultivating a sense of security and interaction, these activities aim at increasing responsibility and participation. Equine-assisted interventions have been used to treat emotional problems, substance abuse, behavioural issues, attention deficit disorder, anxiety, relationship problems and communication problems (Frederick et al., 2015, p. 810).

Accordingly, involving horses in rehabilitation processes has been common practice in many countries for decades, aiming at preventing and alleviating social exclusion (Koistinen, 2005, p. 4). Equine-assisted interventions may include equine-assisted therapy (EAT), hippotherapy (HT), equine-assisted learning (EAL) and therapeutic horseback riding (THR). All these practices comprise mounted or ground-based activities, grooming and stables management. EAT is a treatment incorporating equine activities and the stables environment. Individual rehabilitative goals are set according to the client's needs, under a medical professional's guidance. HT as a physical, occupational or speech therapy treatment utilises equine movement. EAL has an experimental learning approach, using equine activities to develop life skills in service of educational, professional and personal goals. THR contributes positively to the cognitive, physical, emotional and social well-being of individuals with special needs (PATH International, 2017; Frederick et al., 2015; Anestis et al., 2014). Equine-assisted social pedagogy shares many common elements with these interventions, but also differs from them all in its social pedagogical framework.

The ground-breaking pilot course in equine-assisted social pedagogy, arranged in 2002 by the Centre for Training and Development at Finland's University of Kuopio, was designed for professionals with college or university degrees in education, health or social services. Participants also had to be competent with handling horses. A theory-driven solution for practical needs, this social pedagogical approach offered both preventive and rehabilitative activities. People with various needs were brought to the stables to be incorporated into a community or a peer group. The social-pedagogical framework emphasised a sense of community, and the objective was to enhance well-being through animal-assisted rehabilitation (Koistinen, 2005, pp. 4–5). Equine-assisted social pedagogy highlights the idea that the community members at the stable learn from each other through interactions and experiment collectively. Stables working with a social-pedagogical approach give special attention to supporting self-regulation, independence and social growth (Koistinen, 2003).

Like other practitioners and scholars in the field of equine-assisted programmes, I can identify good reasons to use horses in human programmes: horses offer something exceptionally healing to the human condition (Karol, 2007; Gergely, 2012; Kaiser et al., 2006). Horses are living, responsive beings with an awareness that gives immediate and honest feedback. They have a better ability than human beings to observe and respond to non-verbal communication and confront behaviours and attitudes. Studies demonstrate the value of horses in mental health interventions with special education pupils. Through equine-assisted therapy these children have gained a deeper understanding of their values, learning, social skills and life skills (Hauge et al., 2014; Trotter et al., 2008).

Equine-assisted social education as intervention in a school context

I practice equine-assisted social pedagogy in both my work and my research, and in particular in application to school contexts. I have started to use the term 'equine-assisted social education' (EASE) to refer to my work, which can be seen as a part of school education. The main purposes for developing this special approach with horses and social pedagogy are to strengthen pupils' social inclusion and relatedness in school. Many pupils have no interest or motivation to cooperate or participate in conventional forms of learning. These pupils are carrying with them their past disappointments and failures in life, as well as a negative parental influence. Some pupils view teachers and school adults with disbelief or discomfort. Pupils with negative experiences in the past usually lack confidence in school personnel. I believe that EASE meets these pupils' diverse needs. It serves as a catalyst to build pedagogical relationships and trust, especially with at-risk pupils with behavioural issues. Both national and local curricula in Finland encourage teachers to be creative and innovative, to develop new forms of activities at schools to provide better learning and well-being, and EASE can be one approach for them to do this.

Context and case studies from developing EASE in schools

I began with EASE in a school context in 2003, when I was teaching two school drop-outs and organised learning experiences for them based on equine-assisted social pedagogy. I reported the results of this work in my thesis on the pilot course in Kuopio (Kjälldman, 2005). Since then pupils have attended EASE sessions at my 'backyard stable', located next to a national park. In addition to equine activities, this environment provides a milieu for several other activities, including hiking, swimming and fishing in the lake, building and gardening. Sports and games can also be played in the riding arena. For equine activities I have two half-blood mares and a Shetland pony gelding. They were chosen for these activities for their friendly personalities and rather small size. Being curious about what is happening when they hear voices drawing nearer, these horses are ready at the gate waiting to greet groups. My stable doors are open year-round, allowing the horses to live as natural a life as possible. Participating in equine-assisted activities can be stressful for horses, so these conditions are important both for animal well-being and for maintaining desirable behaviour.

Supportive relationships are important for well-being and growing up (Boddy, 2011). Thus, the EASE approach includes coequal activities that pupils and adults can experience together. In one EASE project with a special education class, the teacher organised weekly visits to the stable as class trips. All participants were engaged in the activities at the stable in three ways. Social pedagogical practice suggests working with the whole child using head, heart and hands (Cameron et al., 2011). Thus, pupils were gaining new knowledge and skills about stables, horses and other participants (head); they were feeling and sharing emotions (heart); and they were attending to different activities and chores together (hand). They were catching horses, feeding and grooming them, making observations and discussing horses and feelings. Group processing was facilitated by co-operation and teamwork. Equine activities were followed by closing sessions with snacks, since being seated and sharing treats created a favourable ambience for a deeper dialogue. At the stables, the teacher and a school assistant participated in activities, took pictures, observed activities and provided personal support for pupils if needed. I instructed equine activities and took care of security concerns and both human and animal well-being.

Despite the different needs that the groups have, I apply broadly the same routines with each school group. Sessions are planned together with the homeroom teacher, taking pupils' needs into consideration. Parents and pupils are provided with information including a schedule, safety regulations, allergy considerations and the requisite equipment to participate in outdoor education. I visit groups before the first session to explain procedures and to provide details about horses and equine communication. I also present pupils with pictures of horses and the stables, to make them aware of what to expect in case they have problems adapting to new surroundings and situations. Even though my horses are trained to work with various groups, there are safety rules to be considered. The most important rule is to pay attention and be focused. Accordingly, each session begins with non-verbal and team spirit activities that train attention and listening before equine activities commence. I teach pupils non-verbal signs to perform with fingers so that they can communicate with each other during the activities. This makes them more focused and attentive. We discuss and observe basics of equine communication. All exercises are performed in groups or in pairs to avoid the experience of failure alone. If pupils are not willing to work with horses, I provide them with alternative but essential duties, like taking pictures of the exercises or preparing food for the horses.

Special education pupils with behavioural issues attend EASE sessions at the beginning of the school year with the school welfare team (teacher, special teacher, nurse, social worker and psychologist). The whole day is spent at the stable. Just as horses are trained to join their leader in an atmosphere of trust, this caring 'hands-on' approach supports pedagogical relationships. Deeper communication, better behaviour and mood, co-operation and care are more likely to occur around horses than in clinical practice at school. Pupils speak their minds, for instance about their thoughts and hopes, and later sessions at school are easier to accomplish.

Belonging to a group is essential for learning and participation at school. EASE is used not only with special education pupils but also with mainstream groups. To increase the sense of community and co-operation among the pupils, the team spirit of the class is uplifted through annual EASE sessions

with the pupils' homeroom teacher. Supportive relationships between carer and child are important in upbringing (Boddy, 2011, p. 105), and a teacher who can work closely with pupils in all three 'heart, head and hands' dimensions enables supportive pedagogical care. As other scholars have also noted (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009; Sutherland et al., 2009), an encouraging and caring teacher makes a substantial impact through promoting a healthy classroom climate, pupils' engagement with school, and pupils' academic and social-emotional outcomes. EASE activities promoting head, heart and hands approaches provide new communication experiences, new competencies and valuable insights. When the teacher acts as part of the team, he/she becomes engaged with pupils and this helps to build a sense of community and relatedness.

From practice to research

Experiences and observations with equine-assisted social education practice led me to launch a project researching the approach. In my doctoral thesis, currently underway, I am comparing outcomes of EASE interventions with two other types of intervention undertaken with seven special education groups. The participants in this research were in the third or seventh grades, and had special needs relating to learning, attention problems or both. Two groups were provided with EASE treatment at the stable. The EASE intervention employed a social-pedagogical framework with activities based on the *EPIC-training* manual (Trotter, 2008) and co-operative tasks. As the EPIC-training goals aim to enhance communication skills and sense of community, groups met success only if they worked collectively. The other three treatment groups undertook school-based interventions called aggression replacement training (ART) or co-operational mathematics. In addition, two groups were assigned to undertake their typical learning routines, labelled 'treatment as usual' (TAU) groups. Each treatment group received an eight-week intervention consisting of one 90-minute session per week. Research participants' well-being was measured using the standardised Anderson System of Empirically Based Assessment, ASEBA (Achenbach and Rescorla, 2001). Questionnaires were administered to pupils, parents and teachers in pre-test, post-test and follow-up (six months after intervention) phases. The results of the comparison between the three intervention models and the TAU group will be presented in my doctoral thesis.

Discussion

It has been my experience that equine activities teach responsibility and trust. In addition, pupils learn essential skills for later life; co-operation, communication and means–ends problem-solving tasks. EASE benefits both pupils and school adults, as for horses the human participants are equal no matter whether they are teachers, assistants or pupils. The teacher's role changes from leader to participant, with all participants learning (head), feeling (heart) and acting (hands) together and facilitating closer interaction and connection. I have noticed both in my work with pupils and during my research intervention that social connections and team spirit are strengthened when stables duties and activities are carried out together. Working with horses encourages adults to speak *with* pupils instead of *to* them. I have felt that chatting over the horse's back offers an opportunity for deeper discussions and for sharing thoughts and hopes. These dialogues are needed when pupils are seeking their inner strengths and insights for the future. I believe that the stables environment aims to cultivate a new and positive social orientation by supporting personal growth and providing opportunities for pupils' competencies to be recognised and encouraged.

Schools as communities are required to implement meaningful programs to enhance protective factors for pupils. Interacting with horses, as by participating in an EASE programme, embraces elements that improve such protective factors. Pupils need to control their temperament when horses are present, and practice locus of control. The stables environment also features clear rules to follow and a reason for doing so; if instructions are not obeyed, the consequences follow immediately. The stables environment and equine-assisted activities provide pupils with stimulus, exercise and fresh air, supporting well-being, learning and growth. It might also offer an environment for educational inclusion.

Animal-assisted interventions open up new possibilities in social pedagogy. All animals facilitate connection and enhance communication, but using horses in social pedagogy offers a unique tool to build team spirit and discover inner strengths. Each pupil has a role and a value at the stables. Pupils are

not seen as objects that adults need to support, but act as competent participants, taking care of the common duties and the horses. Rothuizen and Junker Harbo (2017, p. 10) describe social-pedagogical approaches as aiming at inclusive pedagogy; just so, equine-assisted social pedagogy provides a caring environment for vulnerable pupils, supporting their meaningful participation. All duties performed at the stables are valuable and needed, be they grooming, feeding, riding, driving or maintaining premises. Taking responsibility for stables chores and learning significant new skills develops confidence with practical procedures and dialogue.

Even though equine-assisted social pedagogy is gaining recognition and acceptance, it could be utilised in more innovative ways. Equine communication is universal, and in many cultures the horse furnishes a metaphor for beauty, strength and godliness. Stables constitute small societies with certain fixed routines and firm vocabularies. On that account stables are emotionally suitable places for e.g. immigrant families (as well as for anyone else) to participate in activities and build connection, learn skills and achieve a sense of belonging and social integration. In my own work and research, social interactions among school groups with pupils with special needs are strengthened by performing EASE. Thus, the approach could be applied more widely at schools so that teachers could participate in equine-assisted social pedagogy to learn and to teach social-emotional skills, connection and bridge-building communication.

List of abbreviations

EAL	Equine-assisted learning
EASE	Equine-assisted social education (in a school context)
EAT	Equine-assisted therapy
HT	Hippotherapy
THR	Therapeutic horseback riding

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Declarations and conflict of interests

The author declares having no conflict of interest. All procedures followed were in accordance with ethical standards. All institutional and national guidelines for the care and use of equines were followed.

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