

An Exploration of an Equine Facilitated Learning Intervention with Young Offenders

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Abstract

This research reports a qualitative study to explore the behavioural responses to, and reported reflections from Young Offenders undertaking an Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL) Intervention in prison in the UK. Learning was facilitated by an instructor and the participants were taught introductory natural horsemanship skills. Establishments holding young adult prisoners are typically characterised by increased disruption to the regime, and with greater incidents of violence, bullying and conflict than in other types of prison. A resulting challenge for those working with young prisoners is the need to respond to increased levels of social isolation, and difficulties in managing impulsivity, problem solving, temper and conduct. It is hoped that this research will provide some initial evidence to contribute to ideas around the nature of learning practical positive skills and knowledge through inter species interactions.

Introduction

Establishments holding young adult prisoners are typically characterised by greater incidents of violence, bullying and conflict than in other types of prison (Edgar, O'Donnell & Martin, 2003; Ireland, 1999). The direct annual cost per year for each prisoner held in a Young Offender Institution (under 21 years of age) is £30,755 (Ministry of Justice, 2011). Young adults have a higher reoffending rate than older adults. Based on reoffending data for prisoners released in the 12 months ending September 2011, 18–20 year olds have a reoffending rate of 56.1% compared to a rate of 45.6% for prisoners aged 21 and over (Ministry of Justice, 2011). A challenge for those working with young prisoners is the need to respond to increased levels of social isolation, and difficulties in managing impulsivity, problem solving, temper and conduct.

Those who support the rehabilitative function of prison have drawn attention to the benefits of educational and psychological programmes where offenders are provided with practical skills they are thought to be lacking (National Offender Management Service, 2012). This whole-person approach, where emotional and practical skills and knowledge, and alternative pro social identities and roles are developed is now recognised as a key factor in an offender's journey away from criminal behaviour (Farrall, 2002).

Building on historical and current practices of keeping animals in prison, particularly farm nonhuman animals (Ministry of Justice, 2014) there is now increasing positivity surrounding working with nonhuman animals in a therapeutic capacity within prisons, particularly in

attempts to promote psychological well-being and support rehabilitative efforts. Techniques with dogs and horses (Davis, 2007; Furst, 2006) relating to effective communication and developing trust have been recognised as promoting positive interaction, whereby individuals learn that respect and compassion yield more rewarding experiences and cooperation than dominance and aggression.

To inform this review the literature was searched from 1990 to 2014 using the search terms, equine facilitated learning, equine assisted learning, equine assisted intervention, equine assisted psychotherapy, equine assisted therapy, equine assisted experiential therapy and equine assisted counselling with the terms young people, young vulnerable adults and young offenders. All papers published in English were considered; only those focused on an intervention of relevance to young people were included in the review.

Despite numerous descriptive reports of prison-based programmes involving horses (Taylor, 2001; Tramutt, 2003; Tyler, 1995; Virdine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002) there are very few robust studies in this area. Some programmes are long running and anecdotally have achieved considerable success with participants such as the Nevada prison rehoming equines program which teaches inmates natural horsemanship techniques with horses who are then rehomed following the program (Miller, 2012; Prison Education, 2012).

In the broader equine intervention related literature there have been individual studies on equine assisted therapy with individuals suffering with disabilities, (Benda, McGibbon, & Grant, 2003; Brogen, Hadders-Algra, & Forssberg, 1996; Haehl, 1996; MacPhail, Edwards, Golding, Miller, Mosier, & Zwiers, 1998; McGibbon, Andrade, Widener, & Cintas, 1998) chronic illness, physical or mental (Hakanson, Moller, Lindstrom, & Mattsson, 2009; Araujo,

Silva, Costa, Pereira, & Safons, 2011), or individuals with eating disorders (Christian, 2005; Haumery, 2010; Hakansan, 2009). In addition, the potential benefits of equine assisted psychotherapy or experiential therapy have also been studied although the outcomes have been mixed in terms of the effectiveness of the interventions with some studies showing positive results and some no effect (Rothe, Vega, Torres, Soler, & Pazos; Schultz, Remick-Barlow, & Robbins, 2007; Klontz, Bivens, Leinart, & Klontz, 2007; Shambo, 2008; Selby, & Smith-Osborne, 2012; De Villers, Ansorge, & Boissin, 2013).

The key difference emerging from the literature between equine facilitated learning (EFL) and equine assisted psychotherapy (EAP) seems to be that EFL focuses on participants learning key social and communication skills with EAP focusing on finding ways to solve participant's emotional problems. However the evidence base is not well developed or defined at this stage.

Some evidence about therapeutic interventions has been produced which indicates the potential of working with young vulnerable adults. Trotter, Chandler, Goodwin-Bond and Casey's (2008) analysis of the role of horses in a group equine assisted counselling with younger participants found improvements in disruptive behaviour, relationships with others and self-esteem. Burgon (2011) explored the experiences of 'at-risk' young people who participated in a therapeutic horsemanship program; finding improved self-confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy and a sense of mastery and empathy.

Dell (2011) focused on equine assisted education (as opposed to psychotherapy) and young people and captured through a qualitative study the enhanced communication skills and sense of pride which the young participants experienced through their ability to communicate with

the horses. More recently Pendry and Roeter (2013) published a randomised controlled trial (undertaken in the US) focused on evaluating the effectiveness of EFL using natural horsemanship techniques on improving child social competence. Their findings reported moderately significant improvements in the social competence of 5th to 8th grade children following the intervention. Further research is however required to try to illuminate which elements of the program caused the effect captured.

In a recent systematic review the authors commented that the published studies so far examining the effectiveness of interventions involving horses lack detail of the horse's role, and the type of horsemanship development offered to the participants (Selby, & Smith-Osborne, 2012). Overall the papers included in this review have been primarily from a psychological or sociological perspective focused on either psychological changes in mood or behaviour or capturing the emotions and responses of participants and have been primarily qualitative in nature.

This paper reports a qualitative study to explore the behavioural responses to and reported reflections of learning from Young Offenders undertaking an EFL intervention in the UK. The intervention involves seven two and a half hour sessions over a four day time period where young offenders use a natural horsemanship approach to interact with the horses on a prison sports field. The participant learning is facilitated by an instructor and the young offenders are taught introductory natural horsemanship skills (Parelli, 2011). It is hoped that this paper will provide some initial insights into the nature of learning through inter species interactions and the possible role of horses in this process.

The first two named authors for this paper were involved in data collection, Dr Ann Hemingway is a public health academic and registered nurse, Dr Rosie Meek is a criminal psychologist focusing on young offenders and sports based interventions, and the third author, Dr Caroline Ellis Hill an occupational therapist and researcher was involved in data analysis. All the authors were involved in preparing this paper. The instructor on the program was Harriet Laurie who established TheHorseCourse Charity in 2010 (TheHorseCourse, 2014). She is a level 4 Parelli Natural Horsemanship student (Parelli, 2011) and her own horses Flower and Stormy, developed to level 3+, were used in this intervention. A law graduate, designer, communications consultant and innovator, she devised the programme from a horsemanship perspective – using high level horses to provide clear feedback and reliable performance; whilst also using natural horsemanship principles and techniques to shape human behaviour.

The aim of this study was to explore an EFL Intervention with male Young Offenders with a view to assessing its impact and developing future methodologies to assess this emerging area of practice. Participants are referred to as students throughout.

The objectives of the study were to:

- Observe two days (first day and last day) of the course in order to identify the potential process of learning and development through analysis of the behaviour of the students and the horses.
- Explore the experiences and perceived learning of the students using semi-structured interviews.

The Equine Facilitated Learning Intervention

The intervention used the principles of the Parelli Natural Horsemanship program as its philosophical basis and structure (Parelli, 2011). The basis of this program has existed for thirty years developed by American Natural Horseman Pat Parelli, and is available to students online as a set of home study resources. The teachings of other natural horsemanship proponents such as Monty Roberts in the UK and Ray Hunt in the U.S. were not used directly to inform this intervention although Pat Parelli widely acknowledges the inspiration and education he received in early life from Ray Hunt (Parelli, 2011). The principles involve action-based, experiential learning, with a non-judgemental approach. The Parelli program uses an approach based on cooperation and partnership development (Savvides, 2012). The term partnership in this context means mutual respect and effective communication, rather than a `master slave` relationship between the human and horse respectively (Brandt, 2004; Birke, 2007).

At the introductory level this program involves `playing` with horses inviting them to respond to requests with the person working from the ground and the horse on a loose rope and halter. All the learning was carried out on the prison sports field with the horses and no prison officers were present on the field during the program. The overall programme consisted of seven two and a half hour sessions over four days with two students, two horses and the instructor being present on the field at any one time. Each student was paired with a horse for the whole of a session they learned with and hung out with that horse on a loose rope throughout that time.

The course consists of short periods of tasked activity supervised by the instructor interspersed with observation of the other student and horse and discussion/reflection time with a focus on enabling the student and horse to both work together and relax together. The

horses were able to graze they were stroked, scratched and hugged by participants during the observation of the program. The learning of each student was facilitated by the course instructor and they were taught how to play the seven 'games' (Parelli, 2011) with the horses.

These games are:

- 1) *The friendly game* (creating relaxation through touch, grazing, grooming, hanging out; building confidence through rhythm and retreat).
- 2) *The Porcupine game* (asking the horse to move their feet through using steady pressure, touching the horse).
- 3) *The Driving game* (asking the horse to move their feet through rhythmic pressure, not touching the horse).
- 4) *The Yo-yo game* (asking the horse to move backwards and forwards).
- 5) *The Circling game* (asking the horse to travel around you on the circle).
- 6) *The Sideways game* (asking the horse to move sideways).
- 7) *The Squeeze game* (asking the horse to go through, between, under or over something).

These games help to establish a communication method between horses and humans.

However in order to be effective the human needs to use clear, phased communication (starting as gently as possible) and control their body language and energy in an assertive non-aggressive way. A horse which has been developed to communicate with humans using this process knows the seven games and is able to be an active participant in the development of the human. They will respond appropriately only when the human is communicating calmly and assertively and maintaining an empathic connection, as well as applying the correct technique.

Horses used in this intervention are developed to a minimum Parelli Level 3 Online (ground skills) out of 4 possible levels (1= introductory to, 4 = competition ready), to ensure the quality of their response and that if the human behaves appropriately they will respond as a partner and put effort into what they are being asked to do.

All 20 of the students included here achieved their level 1 Parelli natural horsemanship qualification with some achieving elements of level 2 and one achieving components of level 3 of the Parelli (2011) program. One of the two returning participants who assisted on the course achieved level 2.

In the academic published literature the Parelli method has been criticised for its potential to produce confusion in both human and horse where communication is poor (Hurn 2012); and in the wider media horse welfare concerns have been raised relating to this method (Mathieson 2013). We observed care being taken to ensure that tasks were understood and achieved by both horse and human. Moments of confusion in the horses were quickly resolved through coaching the students to be calmer, clearer, more empathic or more assertive, as appropriate; or the activity would be paused to enable the student to practice a simulation or observe a demonstration before re-attempting the task with a horse. Indeed this is the very mechanism by which the students experienced the benefits of developing and practicing self-management skills.

When students showed signs of stress or anxiety the task in hand would be paused whilst they were coached to manage their thoughts and emotions through simple mindfulness techniques to stay in the “here and now”, or through moving their feet much as the instructor would help

a horse to regain a calm, connected, learning state of mind. Please refer to the ethics section of this paper for more information on horse welfare.

Materials and Methods

This evaluation aimed to understand the experience of participating in the course rather than to measure cause and effect in relation to the course outcomes (Quinn-Patton, 2002; Tashakori, & Teddlie, 2003). Data were collected as part of the course itself through reflective interviews undertaken with participants by the course facilitator at the end of the course. In addition further interviews and observations were undertaken by independent researchers to further explore emerging themes. Comments from the prison staff who referred the participants to the course are also included. The comments were captured during reflective discussions with the course facilitator in an attempt to explore their experiences with participants after the course was completed.

Participants

The participants involved in this study were all male, aged 18-21 and incarcerated in a young offenders prison in England. For the observational data collection six participants were included. For the interview data collection 20 participants were included (which included the six observed).

The inclusion criteria were :

- Young males (aged 18-21 years).
- Individuals in custody in a prison in England.
- Violent offenders who were deemed to have a greater than 50% risk of reoffending within one year, and significant problems in the areas of thinking and behaviour.

Priority was given to those who were also disruptive or disengaged. Participants were referred to the course by their Offender Supervisor. Of the 20, two were referred who were lower risk.

The exclusion criteria were:

- Those individuals who refused to participate in the course. This did not occur during the evaluation.

This study recruited a convenience sample of 20 participants referred to the course during the period of the evaluation. Three methods of data collection were undertaken to inform this study, observation of the behaviour of 6 students and horses by the researchers, 20 recorded qualitative interviews on completion of the course undertaken by the course facilitator, and 4 recorded qualitative interviews undertaken by an independent researcher to further explore and verify the themes which emerged from the students reflective interviews undertaken with the course facilitator. All participants were asked to volunteer for these further interviews, four agreed. Three independent researchers were involved in collecting the data and offering independent verification of the findings.

Observations

One researcher observed a course session of two and a half hours on two occasions, one at the start of the course and one at the end (for four students at the start and end of the course and for a further two students when they helped on a course following completion of their own, six students altogether). Each session included two students and one facilitator. The researcher did not take part after being introduced to the students and horses and stood outside the arena and charted student and horse behaviour. In addition each student with their equine partner was videoed from outside the arena for thirty minutes of each of these sessions

to allow another researcher to independently verify the observations of the attending researcher both used the chart in Table 1. to record observations.

Analysis

Specifically the students and their effectiveness in the games with the horses was observed and charted (see Table 1). This allowed the researcher to map the observed behaviour of the human and equine participants. Each time the student interacted with the horse the researcher recorded where the participant`s behaviour appeared to place them on the chart.

The observation chart has been adapted from a chart (Parelli, 2011, Table 1) designed to map a horse`s behaviour in order to offer insights into the type of `horsenality` (rather than personality) the horse has. This is seen as important, as to help horse human communication the human must flex their strategy to fit the horse and the situation, learning to respond appropriately for that horse in the moment.

The adaptation of this observation chart has been informed by research focused on human horse communication guided by symbolic interactionism (Brandt, 2004, Irvine, 2004). These researchers argue that humans and nonhumans co-create a language system by way of the body to facilitate the creation of shared meaning. This approach challenges the privileged status of verbal communication within symbolic interactionism and elsewhere and claims that body language has its own unique complexities between beings, both human and nonhuman alike. The body is seen as a vehicle of expression and communication and in this study the observation included the body language of both horse and human. This body language between human and horse, and horse and human is described on the chart in language which attempts to describe how the human appeared to the observer when they communicated with

the horse. In so describing this however the response of the horse is also captured as the horse will only respond appropriately to the communication if it is delivered calmly, assertively and correctly, therefore the video images of both partners informed the observation data.

Studies to date in this area (Irvine, 2004; Flynn, 2000; Alger, & Alger, 1997) have focused on human interactions with predators such as dogs and cats, whereas horses are prey animals and therefore fundamentally different in the way they see the world and interact with each other and with humans (Brandt, 2004). Interactions between humans and horses involve some degree of risk due to the size and power of the horse and therefore effective communication is essential for safe interaction.

Table 1.

Smooth movements, loose muscles, forwards Jerky movements, tight muscles, backwards

Fast, calm aggression	Destructive, rough won't stand still	Exuberant, fast, fun, play loose muscles	HIGH ENERGY	Fast efficient, athletic, vigilant	Can't keep still frenetic, reactive	Fight/flight
Slow and deliberate aggression	Pushy, dominant	Experimental, brave, assertive		Responsive, perceptive, speedy curious	Hyper vigilant, tense, jerky movements	Sweaty, panicky, running about
DOMINANCE	PLAY	CONFIDENCE/ PLAY		CONFIDENCE/ CURIOSITY	FEAR	TERROR
Hostile, refusing, "try and make me"	Moves slowly, lazy resistant, makes you work harder	Persistent, calm, focused, dependable		Bonding, Sensitive, gentle, connected	Weak, ineffective, tight body, retreating	Trembling
Calm, determined, immovable "you can't hurt me"	Won't move, unyielding	Patient, slow, at ease	ZERO ENERGY	Peaceful, connected, tranquil	Can't move, fixed	Frozen in fear

Soft muscles, calm stillness, easy posture Tight muscles, awkward posture, almost invisible

Student Observation Sheet (adapted from Parelli Natural Horsemanship Horsenality Tool, 2011)

The chart maps four quadrants along two continuum which consist of high energy to low energy and dominance through confidence to fear which means the four quadrants consist of:

Table 2.

Fast, calm aggression	Destructive, rough won't stand still	Exuberant, fast, fun, play loose muscles	HIGH ENERGY
Slow and deliberate aggression	Pushy, dominant	Experimental, brave, assertive	
DOMINANCE	PLAY	CONFIDENCE/PLAY	

Dominant/Confident High Energy.

Table 3.

DOMINANCE	PLAY	CONFIDENCE/PLAY	
Hostile, refusing, "try and make me"	Moves slowly, lazy resistant, makes you work harder	Persistent, calm, focused, planning, dependable	
Calm, determined, immovable "you can't hurt me"	Won't move, unyielding	Patient, slow, at ease	ZERO ENERGY

Dominant/Confident Low Energy.

Table 4.

HIGH ENERGY	Fast efficient, athletic, vigilant	Can't keep still frenetic, reactive	Fight/flight
	Responsive, perceptive, speedy curious	Hyper vigilant, tense, jerky movements	Sweaty, panicky, running about
	CONFIDENCE/ CURIOSITY	FEAR	TERROR

Confident/Unconfident High Energy.

Table 5.

CONFIDENCE/ CURIOSITY	FEAR	TERROR
Bonding, Sensitive, gentle, connected	Weak, ineffective, tight body, retreating	Trembling
Peaceful, connected, tranquil	Can't move, fixed	Frozen in fear

Confident/Unconfident Low Energy.

As this intervention focuses primarily on developing student`s behaviour through rehearsal it seemed appropriate to observe and map behaviour in order to capture any potential changes.

Interviews

On the final day of each course semi-structured reflective interviews (Liamputtong, & Ezzy, 2005) were undertaken by the course facilitator with each individual student (n=20). These focused on the learning of the students and enabled them to reflect on their experiences and learning. These interviews were audio taped with their consent in order to enable an independent researcher to analyse the interview data. Further interviews were also undertaken with participants (n=4 of the same students) by a researcher and audio taped in order to further explore and validate the findings. Interviews were undertaken in a sheltered spot on the sports field and lasted for 15-20 minutes with the course facilitator and up to 45 minutes with the researcher. Prompts were used during the interviews which focused on encouraging the students to consider the nature of the course, what they had learnt and their reflections on any impacts this might have had on them during the course and outside the course during the rest of their time in prison.

The 20 facilitator interviews are part of the course itself which is why they needed to be carried out by the facilitator. It needs to be borne in mind that the data thus created are influenced by the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee and it could be the case that students were giving 'socially acceptable' answers (Radley, & Billig, 1996). However, the responses of the students are still valuable at this exploratory stage of

evaluation for this intervention and are supplemented and verified by the researcher interviews.

Analysis

The audiotapes were transcribed including both interviewer/interviewee contributions and non-verbal utterances such as uhm, ahh, and silences. The transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun, & Clarke, 2006) with a focus on gaining an understanding of the participant`s perceptions of the impact of the course. Each transcript was read and re-read in depth. First level thematic analysis was undertaken using pattern recognition which generated emerging themes using the words of the interviewees and second level analysis then being undertaken to integrate themes and further elucidate the recurring meanings from the interviewee transcript data (Boyatzis, 1998; Quinn-Patton, 2002). Each transcript was compared and contrasted with later transcripts to identify themes which were discussed by the research team and integrated and revised in the light of issues identified in subsequent transcripts.

Ethical Issues

Access to the setting and participants was negotiated by the researchers and the course facilitator and was informed by the research proposal and ethics process required by the prison service which was successfully gained prior to commencing the study. Consent was gained from the participants by the course facilitator and the researchers using a consent form and information sheet. The participants were free to withdraw from the research process at any time without having to withdraw from the intervention unless they so desired. Great care was taken not to pressurise the participants. The researchers were aware of the potential

for the participants reading and writing skills to be limited and offered support where needed in a sensitive manner. Safety and confidence were at all times the priorities. At no time were students observed to display distress. All the information collected and the identity of the participants was confidential. Each participant was given a code number which was used to identify the data collected.

The behavioural stress responses of the horses were observed using an approach based on research undertaken to develop a behaviourally based observation schedule to assess stress and distress in horses (Young, Creighton, Smith, & Hosie, 2012). At no time were participants left unsupervised with the horses.

No participants had a known history of nonhuman animal abuse.

Results

Observations

The students observed in this study at the start of their course were all recorded in the red areas on the right of the chart exhibiting instinctual behaviour which could be described as tense or weak and ineffective. All the participants observed by the end of the course had moved their observed body language into the green quadrants and could be described as becoming calmly assertive, confident, focused and gentle.

Table 6.

Smooth movements, loose muscles, forwards Jerky movements, tight muscles, backwards

Fast, calm aggression	Destructive, rough won't stand still	Exuberant, fast, fun, play, loose muscles	HIGH ENERGY	Fast, athletic, vigilant	Can't keep still frenetic, reactive	Fight/flight
Slow and deliberate aggression	Pushy, dominant	Experimental, brave, assertive		Responsive, perceptive	START OF THE COURSE Hyper vigilant, tense, jerky movements	Sweaty, panicky, running about
DOMINANCE	PLAY	CONFIDENCE/PLAY		CONFIDENCE/CURIOSITY	FEAR	TERROR
Refusing, "try and make me"	Moves slowly, lazy resistant, makes you work harder	END OF THE COURSE Persistent, calm, focused, dependable		Sensitive, gentle, connected	Weak, ineffective, tight body, retreating	Trembling, awkward
Calm, determined, immovable "you can't hurt me"	Won't move, unyielding	Patient, slow, at ease	ZERO ENERGY	Peaceful, connected, tranquil	Can't move, fixed	Frozen in fear

Soft muscles, calm stillness, easy posture Tight muscles, awkward posture, almost invisible

Student Behaviour Observation Sheet (adapted from Parelli Natural Horsemanship

Horsenality Tool, 2011)

The researchers observed and recorded that the students appeared to have grown in confidence, learnt to control their body language and learnt to communicate effectively with

the horses. All the students showed observable improvement in their ability to control their body language, to be assertive rather than aggressive or ineffective or anxious, between the start of the course and the end. This was charted through the observers placing the majority of their observations in the right hand side red quadrants (see marked dimensions on Table 7.) in the first session:

Table 7

START OF THE COURSE
Hyper vigilant, tense, jerky movements
FEAR
Weak, ineffective, tight body, retreating

In comparison with making the majority of their observations at the end of the course in the marked dimensions in the green zone (see marked dimension on Table 8.).

Table 8.

END OF THE COURSE
Persistent, calm, focused, dependable
Patient, slow, at ease

The researcher who was present and observed the whole two and a half hour session at the beginning and at the end of the course recorded their observations for the whole period. However they specifically also recorded their observations for the thirty minute period of the video recording starting and stopping their observations with the video recording to ensure direct comparisons could be made by another researcher observing the videos only.

Interviews

The following findings emerged from analysis of the interview audio data. All the observed participants were also included in those who undertook a final interview (n=20) including the two students observed who had previously completed their course. The participants are identified here through letters of the alphabet to show the range of responses from different participants. The following were identified as important areas of learning from the participant's accounts. 1) Qualities students felt that they had developed. 2) Qualities of the course that they identified as helping them. 3) The ripple effect of being more relaxed on the wing, and 4) increased confidence to learn.

Qualities developed

Calm assertiveness

All but one of the students described how they had become calmer and more assertive they described how the course helped them to rehearse these skills and how rehearsing them with the horses helped them to want to engage with the course.

“To keep calm, I am not usually calm never calm on the outside”. “I have practiced keeping calm you have got to let the horse feel safe.....you need to bring it (your energy) down to get things done”. “Calmer with people, patience, I would get angry”. “Normally I would get angry”. “I control myself now I can do it rather than fight...never thought about it on anger management thing or life skills....just ignored it...it feels good with the horses when they respond you want to try.” (A)

“Once I had felt it (harmony with the horse) it feels lovely I wanted to put the effort in...get the result...know I can do it.” (H)

Confidence

Most of the students talked about how unconfident they normally were and how they found their confidence grew through undertaking the course. Interestingly the student`s responses reflected that they equated angry behaviour with lack of confidence rather than aggression, through their reflections on the course they were able to articulate this.

“It`s always the bad temper...I have no confidence...I hate that feeling when nothing works. Now I know I can do stuff I am going to study more.....I am more confident I feel happier in myself more confident on the wing, my mates have noticed.” “I would say (people should do the course) people with the same problems as me people who are angry.....with no confidence really it gives you more confidence you know by having a go.” (C)

Two former students who had completed the course returned to help future students. They reflected on what this opportunity meant to them interestingly once again reflecting on the influence of the course on their ability to engage with learning and development.

“Giving me responsibility I enjoy it...it feels proper good when someone else gets it I feel self-belief I can teach people I want to do level 2 (horsemanship) I want to come back and help I am doing the City & Guilds. The more I learn the more I can teach.” “I give up a bit too easy in life...I could have achieved a lot of things. I am going to do my CV and get out there. Remember your comfort zone (for learning) push forward, not too much but move forward.” (Q)

Focus – not giving up

Fifteen of the students reflected on how they had developed greater focus and try, they felt that through the nature of the course it helped them not to give up to engage and keep going.

“I need to work harder to get things done....I give up too easy.....never give myself a chance”. “ If things don` t go to plan I would normally give up....need to keep going the horses show you”. “You would not give up so I went along with it....the horses are interesting it feels good when they do things for you....you want to try”. “I was never fussed to do stuff.....getting to know the horse`s feels different”. “At first I was not focused in order to get better, you have to do it (focus) and try harder.” (E)

Qualities of the course that helped me

Practicality

The positive qualities of the course which all the students reflected on referred specifically to the practical nature of the course and being able to try things out.

“Doing it for real....stop thinking about it...do it!...Its more practical (the course) you can see the results...other courses they are just telling you.” “Being given a chance to have a go....I never give myself a chance.” (I)

Facilitation

All but one of the students reflected on the style of facilitation and the feedback from the horses and the facilitator, the feedback from the horses seemed to really resonate for the participants it was clear and immediate and they seemed able to accept it for what it was in the moment.

“You don` t nag just tell me and let me try....you believed that I could do it”. “I have wasted my life away...horses can sense if you`re angry or stroppy you have to be clear minded otherwise they won` t do it....they tell you straight away....this week I have had more good feedback than in the rest of my life.” (A)

Ripple Effect - Calmer on the wing

Most students reflected on the impact of the course on their behaviour in prison specifically on the wing with other prisoners and officers.

“On the wing people have said I am calmer...I was always angry... mealtimes on the wing don't go in all guns blazing be calm it's easier..... give people a chance.” (N)

Being given the opportunity to rehearse being calm and reducing energy levels in order to communicate with the horses for the students seemed to have impacted substantially on their behaviour elsewhere. They reflected on how they had learned to relax and learnt to consider others and whether they can communicate effectively. For example:

“I have not been getting aggressive on the wing I do in life get p****d off with people I have learnt to relax on this course learnt to forget about it the main reason the horse won't do it is it's a misunderstanding for everyone...I am more understanding often (with people) you're not understanding each other.” “I have practiced keeping calm...horses read body language... makes you realise that when you think your not letting of a lot of energy you actually are...bring energy down...less confrontation.” (S)

Indeed the reflections extended to the impact of the course on other persistent problems for them.

“More relaxed in the past two weeks than the last year my sleeping has improved more calmer... no stress in the evening....that habit of stilling everything down...helped me with relaxing around people...not normally relaxedwhen your wound up take a breather let it go.” “I thought I was relaxed I did not even realise myself..... the horses they tell you... people look at you differently not be intimidated anymore...more respect.” (R)

Learning to learn

The students also reflected on learning to learn and experiment with learning, their own and others.

“I always say I can’t do things but I can....more courage to do things...I am more focused on learning...just realised I can enjoy it....learning is a luxury not everyone has the chance to learn new things.” “Learn to let everyone do things in their own time...everyone is different.”(P)

Reflections of the prison staff

The reflections of two Offender Supervisors have been considered here who between them referred seven of the participants to the course.

“All the participants I referred have not completed mainstream programmes (in the prison) for a variety of reasons ranging from lacking confidence to attend, not meeting specified criteria and not wanting to engage. I have noticed that those I referred, post course, have been more confident and assertive and better able to express their feelings, manage their emotions and have a greater ability to see the perspective of others, including their victims.”

“Usually when I interview prisoners after a course it’s like getting blood out of a stone....these young men clearly got a lot of insights from this course...all my lads have

been very positive....one told me it was the best thing he had ever done – monumental for him it opened his eyes to who he can be.”

The findings from this study will now be considered in relation to the literature and their overall relevance for the group under study.

Discussion

The findings from this initial study are important for different disciplines both relating to young offenders and EFL interventions. This study offers a step forward as little has been published to date specifically for this group. The ability of horses to help humans positively develop their behaviour, relationships with others, self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-mastery has been alluded to previously within the few papers published on this area with young people (Trotter, et al., 2008; Burgon, 2011; Dell, 2011). This study would add to these findings by suggesting that horses can also help with developing interpersonal skills, temper control and understanding others which would concur with the findings from Pendry and Roeter (2013) whose randomised controlled trial found improvements in young people`s social competence following an EFL intervention using natural horsemanship techniques. This study would also suggest that EFL can provide the small successes that may lead participants to learn to learn confidently and with pride as reflected on by the participants in their interviews and as found previously in Dell`s study (2012) with young people. Indeed the three key themes which emerged from the interview data and were also observed and recorded by the researchers were the development of calm assertiveness, confidence and focus. This study would suggest that the development of these transferable skills in the perceptions of the participants then in turn impacted positively on their behaviour in prison.

Indeed the longer term benefits of this programme have now been examined more closely in a review published by The Horse Course, New Philanthropy Capital and CLINKS, both of whom offer evaluation expertise to the third sector (2015). 12 month reoffending rates were found to have reduced by 27 % compared with the Offender Group Reconviction Scale prediction for the study group (n=25). This is a small group, but the results were statistically significant (The Horse Course Evidence Review, 2015).

It is also crucially important when exploring an intervention to consider the qualities of the intervention that render it effective. Indeed when writing specifically about what works to engage young offenders Prior and Mason (2010) highlight the necessity within research in this area to explore how program implementers can successfully engage young people and the techniques and resources they need to do so. This preliminary evaluation allowed both the participants and the researchers to reflect on this issue. The participants reported that being able to do something practical and getting immediate feedback from the horses and the facilitator was an essential quality of the intervention rather than, “just talking about it”. In addition the researchers observed the participants learning to learn confidently and learning to empathise. They had to try to understand the point of view of the horse in order to be effective when communicating with them. These are the very qualities which Prior and Mason (2010) highlighted when considering the evidence so far on what works to engage young offenders. It would appear that as a result of this course participants learnt to `listen` to another `being` through rehearsal and then reflected on the positive impact that had made on their relationships with other prisoners on the wing which they reported impacted positively on their overall behaviour in prison.

The numbers of participants included in this study limits the rigour of the data and use of data gathered as part of the course needs to be taken into account; however the observations and responses give insights into the effects of the course for these students and some indications of the processes which may be involved. The observation schedule used has been piloted in this study only so is not validated to be used with other groups at this time.

Conclusion

Through working in a way with the facilitator and the horse which was action-based, experiential, with a non-judgemental approach the young offenders who usually find it difficult to engage; were observed to move from appearing anxious, tense and ineffective to being calm, assertive and confident when working with the horses. They reported feeling more confident and more in control of situations away from the horses. This short intervention appeared to have a deep effect on them.

Natural horsemanship has a comparatively small but growing following across the world, as the particular version used here has a system and clear games to learn and play it lends itself to evaluative research as the observer can map, and analyse the interaction between horse and human. Indeed this communication system allows for detailed observation of the horse and human interaction in a way which has not arguably been possible before and has great potential to further our understanding of this unique inter species relationship between prey animal and predator.

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