



# **If it's safe, and it's successful -then it's OK.**

**-An ethnographic study of key factors and interaction  
in a Therapeutic Horsemanship program for Young People**

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## Abstract

The cross-scientific field of Equine Assisted Interventions (EAI) for human health, education and wellbeing is wide, varied, and rapidly growing with an expressed need of increased knowledge. Interventions involving horses are used to address a variety of difficulties and suggested as an alternative option for children and youth in need of support, who for different reasons do not or cannot benefit from traditional therapeutic or educational contexts or settings. Research thus far has mainly investigated outcomes while systematic knowledge about processes and characteristics of these interventions is still lacking. The purpose of the study was to increase knowledge and understanding of EAI for children and youth by exploring key factors and interaction in a Therapeutic Horsemanship groundwork program for disadvantaged Young People. The research was of an exploratory nature, with qualitative research methods and an ethnographic approach where data was collected through a field study based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Data was analysed by Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Results show that the interaction can be understood as a triad consisting of child, practitioner(s) and horse. Key factors in the intervention can be understood through eight interrelated themes, divided into Framework Themes and Content Themes. The Framework Themes are *Concept*, *Environment* and *Activity*. The Content Themes are *Safe Spaces*, *Communication is Key*, *Positive Perceptions*, *Helping Horses* and *Learning for Life*. These themes interrelate, enabling and affecting the intervention and interaction in the triad. To understand processes in the intervention, findings were interpreted through Experiential Learning Theory and the Biophilia Hypothesis. Results show the significance of the whole concept and the equine environment, and that learning can be identified throughout the intervention. Through interaction, cooperation and training with the horse, the Young Person learns, acquires and develops awareness, competences and skills which can eventually be transferred to their everyday life, thus providing increased social competence and ability to handle difficulties. The intervention can be summarised as being child-centred, horse-focused and action-based. Findings suggest a significance of working exclusively with rescue horses, and that EAI based on groundwork activities can offer a novel and positive experiential learning experience for young people. Findings further suggest that the experiential learning process in EAI may be directable to address various issues, and that EAI/groundwork therefore could be a suitable option for children and youth for whom more traditional or conventional settings for education or therapy are not an option.

*Keywords:* Equine Assisted Interventions, Equine Assisted Learning, Equine Assisted Services, Therapeutic Horsemanship, Disadvantaged, Young People, Child, Rescue Horses, Groundwork

## Sammanfattning

Det tvärvetenskapliga fältet hästunderstödda insatser (HUI) för mänsklig hälsa, lärande och välbefinnande är snabbt växande med ett behov av ökad kunskap. Tidigare forskning har huvudsakligen rört eventuella effekter och resultat, medan det saknas systematiserad kunskap om såväl processer som insatsernas karaktär. Studiens syfte var att öka kunskapen om hästunderstödda insatser genom att utforska nyckelfaktorer och interaktion i ett program baserat på markarbete med häst för utsatta barn och ungdomar. Studien var av utforskande karaktär, med en kvalitativ forskningsmetod och ett etnografiskt angreppssätt där datainsamling skedde genom en fältstudie baserad på deltagande observation och semistrukturerade intervjuer. Data analyserades genom Reflexiv Tematisk Analys. Resultaten visar att interaktionen kan förstås som en triad bestående av barn, praktiker och häst. Nyckelfaktorer i interventionen kan förstås genom åtta teman fördelade på två grupper; Ramverksteman: *Concept, Environment* och *Activity*, samt Innehållsteman: *Safe Spaces, Communication is Key, Positive Perceptions, Helping Horses* och *Learning for Life*. Dessa teman samverkar, möjliggör och påverkar insatsen och interaktionen i triaden. För att förstå processer i insatsen tolkades resultaten genom Experiential Learning Theory och The Biophilia Hypothesis. Resultaten visar en signifikans av hästens miljö, samt att upplevelsebaserat lärande kan identifieras genom hela insatsen, vilken kan sammanfattas som barncentrerad, hästfokuserad och aktivitetsbaserad. Resultaten visar vidare en signifikans av att arbeta uteslutande med hästar som omhändertagits eller omplacerats på grund av tex vanvård, samt att lärande kan identifieras genom hela insatsen och förefaller kunna riktas/anpassas efter olika behov och syften. Hästunderstödda insatser i form av markarbete kan ses som en lämplig metod att erbjuda upplevelsebaserat lärande, och upplevas som en ny och positiv erfarenhet för utsatta barn och ungdomar för vilka mer traditionella insatser inte är ett alternativ. Genom interaktion och samarbete med hästen lär sig, förvärvar och utvecklar barnet/ungdomen medvetande, kunskap och kompetenser vilka kan överföras till deras dagliga liv och leda till bland annat ökad social kompetens och förmåga att hantera svårigheter.

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## Background

The cross-disciplinary field of child and youth studies is largely built on the so called new sociology of childhood (Matthews, 2007; Korp & Risenfors, 2013), based in a view on children as *being*: capable agents in their own right, rather than just *becoming*: passive recipients and adults in the making. This agentic perspective of children and youth is reflected in the multi-disciplinary field of Equine Assisted Interventions (EAI), where equines are involved in programs for human health, learning and development, built around the premises of interaction between child and equine with support of a professional. Despite increasing research, there is an expressed need for further research to understand processes as well as outcomes (e.g., Burgon, 2011; Burgon et al., 2018; Cagle-Holtcamp et al., 2019; Carlsson, 2016; Ewing et al., 2007; Friesen, 2010; Hallberg, 2017; Hemingway et al., 2015; Hoagwood et al., 2017; Holmes et al., 2012; Hood & Wilson, 2021; Håkanson et al., 2021; Maujean et al., 2013; Pendry & Roeter, 2013; Pendry et al., 2014; Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013; Silfverberg and Lerner, 2020; Thompson et al., 2012).

My research interest in this field stems from a general interest in the relationships and dynamics between humans and animals. This is based in a combination of a lifetime of owning or being around different animals, from stick insects to horses, and a professional life with a red thread of support to people of all ages and for various reasons. In my profession, I have worked in areas like care, social service, research, education, policy-making and accessibility; and come across projects or programs where animals, particularly horses, have been involved for the benefit of humans from childhood to old age. Having witnessed professional, successful programs, as well as (unfortunately) the opposite, I have come to develop an interest in what constitutes a positive, safe and successful intervention or program, for all parties involved.

Children and youth at risk of facing difficulties or risking poor outcomes in life can benefit from early interventions to improve their lives in a number of ways. According to The Early Intervention Foundation (2020), effective early interventions can entail both preventative measures and addressing present problems. This ties in with claimed benefits of EAI, where research indicates positive outcomes regarding wellbeing in the present as well as the learning or acquiring of skills, strategies and competences which may improve future prospects. By identifying and supplying efficient support to children and young people who for various reasons face a risk of poor outcomes or difficult situations in life, they can be provided with skills and strengths which can help manage present difficulties as well as prepare them for adult life. Investing in youth before possible externalised problems are manifested can be regarded as a comparatively low cost with a high benefit (Sansom, 2018). Though there are arguments for early intervention having the most impact if extended during the first few years of a child's life, evidence shows that individuals' life opportunities can be improved at any point throughout childhood and adolescence (Early Intervention Foundation, 2020). Risk factors pose a threat to children's development and can limit their future opportunities, increasing the likelihood of problems related to mental and physical health, exploitation and abuse, criminal involvement or substance misuse. Early interventions aim to reduce risk factors and increase protective factors, through support approaches often targeting four key aspects of child development:

cognitive, behavioural, physical and social-emotional development; areas where support has the potential to make a big impact and provide benefits throughout an individual's life (Early Intervention Foundation, 2020). These are areas where EAI is claimed to have positive effects and outcomes (e.g., Sansom, 2018).

Children facing problems such as conduct issues, learning disabilities, or various clinical diagnoses face a risk of developing severe emotional disorders in adolescence. If such severe emotional disorders are not addressed in adolescence, this can in turn lead to severe psychopathology in adulthood. Therefore, positive and effective interventions at the crucial stage of adolescence, are pivotal both to emotional growth and health of youths at risk (Ewing et al., 2007), and promoting factors such as social competence in youth is thought to be an efficient strategy to prevent adulthood difficulties like emotional, mental, or behavioural disorders (Pendry et al., 2014). Yet, children and youth at risk of issues such as becoming NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) might not be able, willing or motivated to engage in more conventional interventions; regarding teachers, therapists or adults in general with distrust (Ewing et al., 2007). Interventions that include animals such as equines for wellbeing, learning and development have been suggested as viable alternatives for children and young people who are in need of support but for various reasons do not benefit from traditional educational settings. EAI in general include a variety of approaches, whereby guided interactions between humans and equines facilitate positive effects on human function, wellbeing, awareness and development of personal skills. However, though there is a growing body of evidence around outcomes of various equine assisted interventions for children and youth, e.g., communication skills, confidence or self-efficacy (e.g., Maujean et al., 2013; Pendry & Roeter, 2013; Perkins, 2018), there is still limited knowledge regarding the nature of such interventions, as well as their underlying processes and enabling factors. The aim of this study was therefore to contribute to increased knowledge and understanding of Equine Assisted Interventions (EAI) for children and youth by exploring key factors, processes and aspects of interaction in a groundwork-based program for disadvantaged Young People (YP).

### About the Organisation

The study at hand can be described as exploring what happens when humans meet horses in a specific context and setting. To provide a backdrop for the study and forthcoming results, the organisation and its work method are therefore presented as a starting point.

The study was conducted during a very wet spring in North Wales at an organisation called WITH, Welsh Institute of Therapeutic Horsemanship. The organisation was a registered charity and participating in the activities was free of charge. Focus for the study was the *Penytrip Project*, a program where interaction with horses was used to help disadvantaged Young People (YP) with emotional, behavioural and social difficulties. Other programs offered by the organisation were the *Starfish Project*, aimed at YP who for various reasons did not attend regular school, and the *Saturday Club*, which focused on social contact and fun, educational group activities together with, and around, the horses. Both Starfish sessions and Saturday Club meetings were observed for the study, though the focus was on sessions in the Penytrip Project.



At the time of the study, the organisation employed an Equestrian Director, a Director of Operations, and a Sessional Assistant Practitioner. In addition to these there were several volunteers, often young adults who were former participants, or individuals interested in Therapeutic Horsemanship but too old to qualify as participants in the project. All activities within the organisation, as well as any major decisions, were overseen by a Board of Trustees, consisting of four external individuals from varying professional backgrounds. The horses were regarded as a central part of the work force rather than just tools, and every participating horse or pony had been thoroughly assessed to determine their suitability for therapeutic work. During the study there were six horses and ponies involved in the project of varying breed, gender, background, age, height, colour, and general conformation and temper. The organisation's ethos was to only involve so called *rescue horses*: horses who for various reasons had been in need of re-homing, not seldom due to neglect, abuse or insufficient care. The YP helped rehabilitate the horses, some of which eventually went on to a new home, while others stayed on at WITH working with new YP.

WITH's centre was located by the North Wales coastline, and all activities took place at a small farm situated at the top of a hill, at the end of a winding road, with mountains and fields on one side and a wide view of beach and sea on the other. On the farm was a small block of stables and tack room, fields for the horses, and a corral with a round pen and a field shelter. For really bad weather conditions there was a small indoor space at the back of the stable block. Due to its size, it was seldom used as it was too small to accommodate any of the bigger horses or to allow sessions requiring space to move around. Beside the horses and ponies, the farm also housed a dog, a cat and several chickens who were free to roam the grounds during the day. Between the stable block and the corral was a small road, used by walkers and the occasional car or tractor. Getting to the venue required a car as there was no public transport available, and participating YP were often brought to their sessions by relatives or staff from referring organisations.

There were no private referrals; participants were referred to the organisation through professionals working with the YP, e.g., schools, Social Services, or other charities. The content of the referrals varied, from very little information to very detailed ones. Participating was voluntary, and every referred individual given an initial assessment session to determine whether the intervention may be suitable and beneficial for the individual, and, if so, they wanted to take part. If participation was agreed upon, goals were identified together with the individual, and a general plan for the block of sessions outlined. The aim of the intervention was to provide the YP with tools to help themselves, and the program was aimed at *disadvantaged Young People*, a target group which was defined in a broad way, covering a wide range of issues. The term could refer to individuals deprived of necessities in life, such as adequate housing, economy, or education as well as individuals socially disadvantaged by behavioural or mental health issues, or those in local authority care. A person could be referred to WITH on grounds of abuse or neglect, social or emotional issues, disabilities or difficulties in areas such as learning, communication, anxiety, self-harm, psychosocial issues or motor skills. Specific diagnoses were rarely used, and previous participants had represented a wide range of issues from selective mutism to psychosis.

The groundwork ethos was working toward establishing a partnership and emotional connection between human and horse, rather than the human being undisputed leader or boss. In the Penyttrip Project, interaction and different activities together with, usually, one horse were put together to suit the individual YP's goals, needs and difficulties. Riding was not on the agenda, instead the work was based on so called Therapeutic Horsemanship, meaning specific groundwork activities building on handling, communication and interaction with horses. Through learning horsemanship skills, the YP could also learn or achieve skills and coping strategies that they might use in their everyday life. Sessions were one hour long, with one participating young person at a time, and led by a lead practitioner aided by an assistant practitioner. For safety reasons, there were always two practitioners present in every session: the lead practitioner's main focus was the YP, while the assistant practitioner focused on the horse. The activities were organised in blocks of one session per week over a period of six weeks. If a YP should miss one or several sessions, the block could be extended by another two weeks, meaning that the YP could be absent from at the most two sessions without missing out on the original plan. At the start and finish of the block, the YP and caretaker/guardian filled in assessment and evaluation forms, including a self-assessment by the YP.

Before each session, the lead practitioner and assistant practitioner together set up a plan for the session, often with several back up plans. Each session was evaluated afterwards, and necessary adjustments made in preparation for the next. Sessions began with the YP being equipped with a helmet, and if needed also safe footwear and gloves. After repeating the safety rules, participant and practitioner proceeded to the corral to meet the horse. Each session started with grooming. During this the practitioner(s) "checked in" with the YP, taking time to chat to them to get a feeling of their state and mood. Depending on the YP and their plan and goals, the session then proceeded with different activities, such as:

*Obstacle course:* poles, cones, tarpaulins, tires, hoops etc. create a course which the participant then navigates through together with the horse. It might be a course designed to train the specific horse or designed more for the young person's benefit. Sometimes a specific obstacle can symbolise a specific difficulty or obstacle in the young person's life, other times it's "just" an obstacle course for the participant to figure out how to handle.

*Long reining:* working the horse by walking behind/beside it, with long reins attached to each side of the horse's headcollar, and on occasion a roller keeping the reins from falling or trailing on the ground.

*Lungeing:* making the horse circle around the participant at the speed, pace and direction that the participant decides. The YP holds a lunge line which is attached to the horse's headcollar.

*Loose schooling:* like lungeing, but without the line. This usually takes place in a round pen. As there is no physical contact, the YP has to use body language and voice to communicate with the horse.

“7 games”<sup>1</sup>: based on Pat Parelli’s<sup>1</sup> activities for human and horse to develop their communication.

*Quest*: all, or some of the above combined in a quest for the participant, where there is something to be won at the end, like blocks to build a totem pole or a little gadget or toy.

## Introduction

### State of Knowledge and Recent Research

The field of Equine Assisted Interventions (EAI) is fast-growing (Burgon et al., 2018; Hallberg, 2017; Silfverberg & Lerner, 2020), building on the premise that interaction with equines can be therapeutic and beneficial for humans of all ages and circumstances. A general introduction to the field is provided in Appendix A<sup>2</sup>. Acquiring an overview of the current state of knowledge and research relating to the general field of EAI is complicated by it being a broad, cross- and multi-disciplinary field touching on several professional and scientific areas (Lerner & Silfverberg, 2020). One of the drawbacks of a multi-disciplinary field is the vastly expanded research literature (Matthews, 2007), and a fundamental problem within the EAI field is a lack of consensus on terminology referring to the various areas of care, rehabilitation, education, and other interventions where equines are involved. It may be unclear whether the service has a therapy or non-therapy purpose (Hallberg, 2017), or even what kind of interspecies interaction is referred to. With EAI not being one limited, established scientific field, there is also a lack of clear method requirements or rules for publication etc., and diverse scientific methods are used depending on researchers’ disciplines, complicating research comparison as well as experience exchange (e.g., Hallberg, 2017; Kendall & Maujean, 2015, Lerner & Silfverberg, 2020). Another noted lack is that of a unified, empirically supported, or widely accepted theoretical framework to explain why and how interventions including animals may be therapeutic, as well as unified guidelines for safe and successful practice and implementation (Nelson et al., 2016). Settings for interventions vary, as do the manners in which they are organised and delivered (e.g., one-to-one sessions or group sessions, therapy or non-therapy, mounted or groundwork). There are differences between interventions, as well as within similar programs (Kendall & Maujean, 2015), and scientific progress is impeded by the inconsistent use of terms where the same term can refer to different interventions or services, guided by different assumptions and concepts (Wood et al., 2020). As research on EAI is not connected to one single, specific discipline, the field needs to be open to multiple approaches and perspectives (Lerner & Silfverberg, 2020), which further complicates comparison and reviews.

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<sup>1</sup> For further information, see [About Parelli - Parelli Natural Horsemanship](#)

<sup>2</sup> Appendix A. An Introduction to the Field of Equine Assisted Interventions

### *Terminology and Search Criteria*

Equine assisted interventions are used in relation to a wide variety of populations and settings; from riding as rehabilitation to equine knowledge and student support, with target groups ranging from dementia or stroke patients to war veterans and survivors of trauma and abuse. However, due to the aforementioned heterogeneous character of the field and inconsistent use of terminology, searches guided strictly by specific search terms might fail to uncover literature relevant for the study. A wider structured search was therefore conducted in the databases APA PsycInfo, APA PsycArticles, ERIC, ProQuest, DiVA, University West Library Search and Google Scholar, using combinations of key search terms, such as: child\* / youth\* /adolescen\* / young + equine\* / horse\* / animal\* + assisted / facilitated + learning / intervention\* / service\* / activit\*, combined with specific searches on therapeutic horsemanship, social/life skills and learning. Literature with an apparent emphasis on therapy, psychotherapy, rehabilitation and riding, or target groups of adults or elderly were not included in the initial selection. However, as content pertaining to therapeutic or learning-focused interventions, or relevant target groups, settings or approaches etc., might be found under other descriptions, the final selection of literature for an accurate and relevant description of the current state of knowledge in the field was guided by content rather than strictly by terminology. References in initially selected literature were reviewed, and possibly relevant original sources retrieved for further review. Included literature was published within the last 15 years, with the main inclusion criteria children or young people, and planned interventions/services including equines. Focus lay on groundwork and interaction in the equine environment or milieu. There proved to be a wide variety of studied interventions or programs, as well as terminology and research methods. To offer an overview and illustrate the diversity in research approaches, a thematic presentation follows below. Equine Assisted Interventions (EAI) is applied as an umbrella term, while more specific descriptions follow terminology chosen for each publication.

Descriptions of ages vary, from specific age groups (e.g., Boshoff et al., 2015; Pendry & Roeter, 2013) to general references to students, adolescents, or young adults (e.g., Carlsson et al., 2015, 2018; Hauge et al., 2014; Holmes et al., 2012; Kern-Godal et al., 2016; Saggars & Strachan, 2016; Wilson et al., 2017). Other general references are youth (e.g., Cagle-Holtcamp et al., 2019; Dell et al., 2011; Ewing et al., 2007; Kendall & Maujean, 2015; Maujean et al., 2013) or young people (e.g., Burgon, 2011; Hood & Wilson, 2021).

A wide range of descriptions are used to relate to target groups, from more heterogenous descriptions like at risk, disengagement or socio-economic disadvantage (e.g., Hood & Wilson, 2021; Kendall & Maujean, 2015; Maujean et al., 2013; Saggars & Strachan, 2016), to specific descriptions or diagnoses such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, Substance Use Disorder or solvent abuse (Anderson & Meints, 2016; Dell et al., 2011; Kern-Godal et al., 2016; Memishevijk & Hodzhikj, 2010; Byström, 2020). Target groups also include young offenders (Hemingway et al., 2015), alongside individuals displaying a lack of social competence or suffering from depression and/or anxiety or emotional, behavioural, or learning difficulties (e.g., Boshoff et al., 2015; Carlsson et al., 2015, 2018; Ewing et al., 2007; Holmes et al., 2012; Pendry & Roeter, 2013; Wilson et al., 2017).

Studies have also been conducted on the use of Therapeutic Horsemanship for building of trust and resolution of impact of trauma (Burgon, 2018), and whether work and contact with horses may affect psychological development of adolescents with no known specific behavioural or psychological problems (Hauge et al., 2014).

Settings, context and types of intervention, as well as the interpretation of terms, also display a large variation. The term Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) often refers to a learning modality to improve emotional and mental well-being of the client through work with horses, guided by an instructor/practitioner, to achieve determined learning milestones (Arrazola & Merckies, 2020). Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL) interventions incorporating natural horsemanship techniques have been used to improve child social competence (Pendry & Roeter, 2013); to facilitate development of social-emotional competence and resilience for students being perceived at risk of school failure, by means of equine care, riding and social interaction (Saggers & Strachan, 2016) and as a means of learning practical, positive skills and knowledge through inter-species interactions in a prison program (Hemingway et al., 2015). The so called Parelli method has been used to enable participants to achieve competence in horse handling (Maujean et al., 2013), and teaching basic equine science (horse behaviour, management, handling, and riding) may promote emotional safety and learning for at-risk youth (Cagle-Holtcamp et al., 2019). Experiences of young people participating in a mainly groundwork based Equine Assisted Learning program has been examined, to understand the mechanisms by which such interventions may produce positive outcomes (Hood & Wilson, 2021). Possible effects of Equine Assisted Activities (EAA) have been investigated at a racehorse rehabilitation centre, where participants interacted with both live and model horses (Holmes et al., 2012). Equine Assisted/Facilitated Learning sessions have been studied at a residential cultural treatment program for solvent abusing youth (Dell et al., 2011), in an Equine Assisted Social (EASW) work context, involving grooming, riding and stable work (Carlsson et al., 2014, 2015; Carlsson, 2018), and in a program combining Equine Assisted Learning sessions with a psychoeducational life skills program, focusing on groundwork (Perkins, 2018). Sansom (2018) researched resilience alongside other life skills gained through youth participation in Canadian 4-H horse clubs. Therapy and non-therapy approaches also occur combined, e.g., Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy and Learning (EFPL) (Ewing, 2007), Equine Assisted Learning and Therapy (EAL/T), Equine Facilitated Therapy and Learning (EFT/L) and Therapeutic Horsemanship (TH) (Burgon, 2011; Burgon et al., 2018). Some interventions are labelled with variations of therapy, such as Horse Assisted Therapy (HAT) (Kern-Godal et al., 2016), Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) (Wilson et al., 2017) and Equine-Assisted Therapy (EAT) (Boshoff et al., 2015). It is notable that terminology issues reflect the wide field and numerous research angles, complicating comparison and at times even obscuring aims or outcomes.

In general, an image emerges of research in the field being mainly directed toward outcomes of various EAI models; results report improvement of wellbeing and development in young people across a variety of domains including self-esteem, self-awareness, self-efficacy, empathy, relationship building skills, self-regulation, pride, confidence, assertiveness and coping skills alongside a decrease in undesirable behaviours (e.g., Boshoff et al., 2015; Burgon, 2011; Dell et al., 2011; Kendall & Maujean, 2015; Pendry & Roeter, 2013; Sansom, 2018; Wilson et al., 2017). Programs which promote relationships with equines can also improve mental health and

physical well-being (Memishevijk & Hodzhikj, 2010). Horses have been suggested to aid the development of interpersonal skills, temper and emotion control, character strengths and an understanding of others, and participants have demonstrated a positive shift in their general attitude toward life and improved life satisfaction (Boshoff et al., 2015; Hemingway et al., 2015; Maujean et al., 2013; Perkins, 2018). Equine facilitated activities have been found to lower cortisol levels in participating children (Pendry et al. (2014), and studies indicate that EAI may improve wellbeing in young people by encouraging engagement, supporting personal growth and reducing trait anxiety (Hood & Wilson, 2021; Holmes et al., 2012). Various EAI are claimed to contribute to the development of social skills, or life skills, for young people (e.g., Burgon, 2011; Hauge et al., 2014; Sansom, 2018), as participating young people have been able to translate both confidence and the behaviour and skills learned in sessions into real life skills in their everyday lives (Maujean et al., 2013; Pendry & Roeter, 2013; Perkins, 2018). The experiential learning connected to the equine environment can teach a young individual internal as well as external skills, ranging from work ethic and grit to leadership, problem-solving, persistent optimism and an improved understanding and work ethic outside of a classroom setting (Perkins, 2018; Sansom, 2018). Findings of increased self-esteem are contradicted by Ewing et al. (2007), reporting unchanged levels of self-esteem following an intervention. Enhanced communications skills, gained through the ability to communicate with horses, are thought to give young participants a sense of pride (Dell et al., 2011). Further findings have indicated high resilience and self- efficacy source levels, alongside a wide range of other life skills and learning (Sansom, 2018). Examples of such specific aspects of resilience building are the development of communication skills and task perseverance, together with increased abilities to relax, manage stress, and cope with bullying (Saggers & Strachan, 2016). Kern-Godal et al. (2016) found the feeling of mastery to be an important factor for participants, and learning Natural Horsemanship techniques have been pointed out as one specific way to improve young people's social competence; enhancing social competence and behaviour, self-esteem and self-efficacy (Kendall & Maujean, 2015; Pendry & Roeter, 2013). Equine Facilitated Learning is one way of providing alternative learning opportunities through therapeutic experiences with horses, alongside specialist practitioners (Burgon, 2011). Equine Assisted/ Facilitated Learning interventions have been shown to have significant effects on social competence, behaviour, confidence and communication in children (e.g., Pendry et al., 2014; Perkins, 2018), and also enable participants to acquire and develop horsemanship skills and become competent in horse training and handling (Maujean et al., 2013; Saggers & Strachan, 2016), with participants reporting experiences of the interventions having effects on other aspects of their learning (Saggers & Strachan, 2016). Though increasing evidence is offered on possible outcomes for various target groups, research on what aspects, factors and processes that might enable or explain these outcomes appears to be lacking.

The emerging impression is that the horse and the equine environment is a resource with unique qualities. The horse's environment has been noted as an important part of the concept, and one of the factors of EAI which can cause such interventions to be perceived as a novel, motivating and enjoyable therapeutic experience (e.g., Byström, 2020; Carlsson et al, 2015; Carlsson, 2018; Forsling, 2014, 2020; Höglund, 2020;), instrumental in providing a setting not only offering contact with nature but also perceived by participants as emotionally safe and non-

judgemental (Pendry & Roeter, 2013(Cagle- Holtcamp et al., 2019; Perkins, 2018);). It is different from traditional therapy environment; a positive space where therapeutic relationships can be established, and where difficult or sensitive discussions can become less so (Maujean et al., 2013). Interaction or contact with horses is suggested to activate development of attachment in adolescents, which could promote an appealing, therapeutically favourable and possibly motivating care environment (Törmälehto & Korkiamäki, 2020). Interventions promoting relationships with horses have also shown improvements in emotional disorders which traditionally can be resistant to intervention and change (Memishevikj & Hodzhikj, 2010). Interaction with horses in the equine environment and milieu may offer an option for young persons who for various reasons do not benefit from, or engage in, more traditional interventions or treatment (Pendry & Roeter, 2013), who have not responded to more traditional interventions or who have disengaged from traditional institutions (Kendall & Maujean, 2015; Maujean et al., 2013). In students at risk of school failure, engagement and the connection with the school environment can be improved (Saggers & Strachan, 2016). For young persons who have disengaged from society or school and are facing potentially negative and serious consequences in their future life, this type of intervention may provide a viable option (Maujean et al., 2013).

The novel experience and medium of the horse can be a motivating factor, encouraging participants to both attempt and stick at new experiences (Pendry & Roeter, 2013), as children and youth are known to learn more effectively when interested in a subject (Ewing et al., 2007). Interventions that involve equines in treatment plans may be both relevant and appealing to client populations that may not find traditional office or hospital-based treatment accessible or agreeable (Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013), and may provide opportunities to improve life skills and levels of engagement and confidence in young individuals who are at risk of disengagement and/or mental illness (Maujean et al., 2013). Horses, compared to other animals, may bring additional qualities to the therapeutic encounter (Hallberg, 2008). Ewing et al. (2007) describe the horse in some approaches as a vehicle that enables youths to open up and to verbalize problems and fears. The horse may be a therapeutic tool in its own right; prompting participants to be in the present, conscious of their physical and mental states and aware of how their action and interaction may affect others (Pendry & Roeter, 2013). It can have a calming effect, increasing feelings of authenticity, patience, empathy and trust, while enabling participants to free themselves of preoccupations by providing instant, non-verbal and non- judgemental feedback (Carlsson, 2018). The experiential nature of involving horses is thought to positively affect the effectiveness of therapy (Wilson et al., 2017), and interventions with animal interaction may provide positive results even without employing qualified therapies (Holmes et al., 2012). For young people who have experienced abuse, neglect, or been labelled “bad”, such an environment can be a turning point (Ewing et al., 2007).

Relationships have a central role in EAI, between all individuals involved in an intervention or service. The patient-horse relationship is a significant part of participants’ experience (Kern-Godal et al., 2016); by building trust and modelling congruent, respectful and caring relationships with the horses, respecting their individual needs and personalities, participants can feel safe and know that their needs will be respected too (Burgon et al., 2018). It is suggested that the horses can provide important emotional support during treatment, functioning as

facilitators of a positive self-construct (Kern-Godal et al., 2016). The human-horse bonding behaviour is pointed out by Arrazola & Merkies (2020) as particularly important in repeated Equine Assisted Activities, with an emphasis on the importance of the bond being positive, reliable and reciprocal, to generate a secure human-horse attachment and achieve improvements in participants. Adding a horse qualitatively changes the therapeutic relation in Equine Assisted Social Work (Carlsson, 2017) which seems to be facilitated when the horses are perceived by staff and clients as subjects, rather than objects.

The accumulated picture is of a field where research is conducted on a wide variety of interventions for children and youth, with a focus on outcomes rather than processes. Though horses have documented prerequisites for contributing to human health and wellbeing, the state of knowledge about the underlying mechanisms is unclear (Håkanson et al., 2021). Research is called for to elucidate what factors or qualities are central to successful or effective interventions and may have enabled or caused noted effects (e.g., Carlsson, 2016; Hemingway et al., 2015; Hood & Wilson, 2021; Pendry & Roeter, 2013). There is also an identified need for greater empirical study investigating issues such as the effectiveness of including horses and equine science in a therapeutic learning process (Burgon, 2011; Cagle-Holtcamp et al., 2019; Ewing et al., 2007) and the causal effects on human development and wellbeing (Pendry & Roeter, 2013; Pendry et al., 2014), as well as benefits of interventions without trained therapists for children with emotional or behavioural difficulties (Holmes et al., 2012). Studies examining the effectiveness of interventions involving horses so far lack detail of the type of horsemanship utilised, and as there are interventions offering mounted as well as unmounted activities, the field might benefit from researching which aspects of these different approaches that can be of use for which client population (Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013). There appears to currently be a gap between scientific research and the abundance of anecdotal benefit claims, personal beliefs, opinions and practices regarding interventions with animals in general, and equines in particular (e.g., Burgon et al., 2018; Friesen, 2010; Hallberg, 2017; Hoagwood et al., 2017; Pendry & Roeter, 2013; Silfverberg and Lerner, 2020; Thompson et al., 2012). Although there is a developing body of empirical research, it is described as still being in its infancy, and while EAI appear to improve wellbeing in young people (Hood & Wilson, 2021), further research is needed to achieve understanding and insight as well as credibility to the developing field (Burgon et al., 2018). Structured programs, building on the psychology of the horse, and how these principles can be translated into human social and emotional states should be researched (Maujean et al., 2013). Research investigating methods, processes and key factors in EAI for children and young people could therefore complement previous knowledge by providing insights into a seemingly unexplored perspective of a growing field.

### *Motivation for the Study*

From a child and youth perspective, increased knowledge of outcomes as well as characteristics and processes of EAI could be considered of importance to individuals, as well as to the overall fields of Child and Youth studies and Equine Assisted Interventions. There is a general call for further research, and while there is growing evidence of a variety of outcomes, there appears to be a lack of research exploring an apparently unresearched angle of methods, processes and enabling central features (e.g., Håkanson et al., 2021; Pendry & Roeter, 2013; Carlsson, 2016). As interventions involving equines often are connected with both practical issues and not



inconsiderable cost, it is important to weigh these against potential outcomes and benefits (Burgon, 2011; Kendall et al., 2014). A wider community understanding about EAI is needed for recognition and acceptance of EAI as valid therapeutic alternatives (Wilson et al., 2017), and for EAI to become an integral part of “the therapy landscape” despite cost issues etc. (Maujean et al., 2013). Further work is needed, therefore, to address the science to service gap (Hallberg, 2017), and to enable informed decisions regarding various EAI for different populations. A better understanding of the nature and prospects of EAI for children and youth could provide a foundation for informed decisions on the suitability for EAI for a certain population or individual, which might lead to increased access to EAI for children and youth in need of support in relation to health, wellbeing and development. A better understanding might also contribute to improved quality of said interventions.

There is not one set way to provide an Equine Assisted Intervention (Nelson et.al, 2016). Natural Horsemanship techniques show promise to be effective in improving child social competence, but further research is required to try to illuminate which factors caused the recorded effects (Pendry & Roeter, 2013). Horsemanship is often part of larger scheme where groundwork and interaction in the equine milieu is combined with riding and various therapy, educational, or counselling programs, often in group settings. Therefore, exploring processes in an intervention where horsemanship in the form of groundwork is not only central, but also sole-standing as opposed to part of a larger program; which is not therapy but therapeutic in nature; and providing details of the type of horsemanship employed, as suggested by Selby & Smith-Osborne (2013), could address several of the gaps identified by previous research.

Research suggests that EAI, by enabling educational, meaningful, and therapeutic experiences with horses can improve present as well as future wellbeing and enable learning and building of competences in vulnerable young people. This could equip them with protective factors promoting resilience, making them more prepared to handle or avoid difficulties later in life, and evading possible negative life outcomes (Burgon, 2011). Increased understanding of methods, key factors and nature of interaction in a groundwork based EAI could therefore benefit disadvantaged or vulnerable children or adolescents. From a child and youth perspective, access and high quality are important aspects of an intervention. Increased understanding of processes would help move the field forward, supporting research as well as practice related to the fields of Child and Youth Studies and Equine Assisted Interventions. Within the limitations for the study at hand, it would not be possible to conduct a long-term or large-scale study. Instead, the study would aim to contribute to a fuller picture and increased understanding of the field by investigating an unexplored perspective, highlighting a part of the field where research seems scarce or lacking, namely knowledge about key factors and interaction. Participants’ perspectives are essential to evaluate and develop various rehabilitation and training methods (Gulati 2011), and an increased understanding of this perspective could benefit the general fields of Child and Youth Studies and Animal/Equine Assisted Interventions, as well as individual children and youths, by increasing access to appropriate, high quality intervention. By striving to understand actors’ perspectives, investigating what experiences and factors are perceived as central, the study could contribute to an increased growth and understanding of these interventions.

## Theoretical Framework

### *The Biophilia Hypothesis*

The Biophilia Hypothesis (Wilson, 1984) refers to an innate human affinity for, and connection with, nature. It is based in a proposition that natural selection has resulted in humans having an innate tendency to focus on, life, life forms and lifelike processes, meaning that cognitive as well as emotional processes that mimic the nature of life provide most gratification for humans. Humans are biological creatures with a natural bond to nature, and the need to spend time in natural environments, interacting with plants and animals, are a result of human evolution and a prerequisite for humans' physical and psychological wellbeing (Kellert, 1993a).

The Biophilia Hypothesis can be applied to several areas of life, for humans of all ages, to understand “the complicated question of how human affect, intellect, language, culture, technology, and even ethics are molded by a basic human affinity for life and lifelike processes” (Kellert, 1993c, p. 456). Involving biophilic elements in treatment, e.g., adding plants or involving animals, has been claimed to increase its effectiveness (Melson & Fine, 2019), though humans have different preferences regarding type of landscape or animal depending on upbringing and knowledge, which suggests a socio cultural dimension to biophilia (Kellert, 1993b).

### *Experiential Learning Theory*

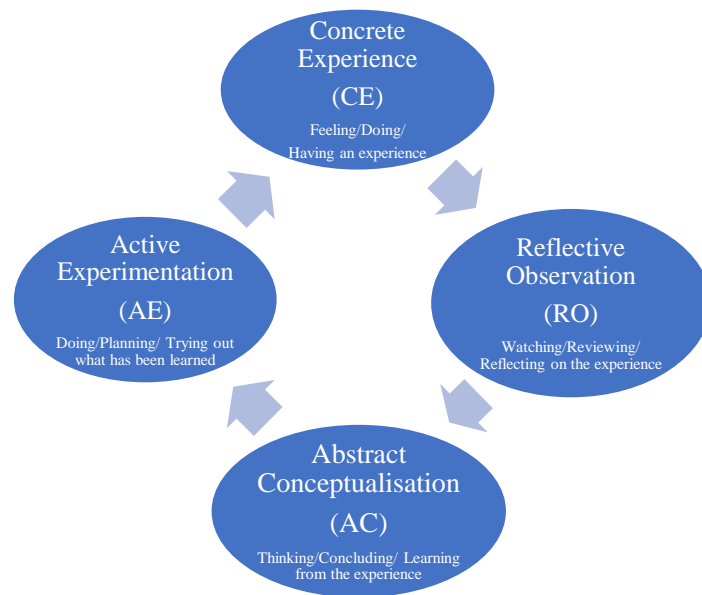
Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) (Kolb, 1984) provides a theoretical perspective on individual learning processes, which applies to all of life's arenas and situations (Kolb, 2015). Humans are constantly enveloped by experience, and the process by which we make sense of everything to find direction, purpose and meaning in our lives is what is called experiential learning: learning from experience. This process is described by Kolb (1984) as the Learning Cycle, which contains four stages, or steps, as illustrated in Figure 1: Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), Abstract Conceptualization (AC), and Active Experimentation (AE).

In ELT, knowledge is seen as the result of a combination of an individual's grasping and transforming experience. In the Learning Cycle, concrete or immediate experiences form the base for observations and reflections. The reflections are simulated and condensed into abstract concepts, forming a base from which new implications for action may be drawn. These implications can then be tested and operate as guides for creating new experiences (Kolb et al., 2001). The learners can use the concepts to develop new theories about the world, which they then actively test. Through this process, experiential learning can provide individuals with the tools they need to take charge of their lives (Peterson & Kolb, 2017).

ELT as proposed by Kolb takes a holistic approach and emphasizes how experiences, including cognition, environmental factors, and emotions influence the learning process (Granberg, 2004). This adaption process encompasses all life stages from childhood and adolescence to old age, and contains adaptive concepts such as creativity, decision making, problem solving and attitude change (Kolb, 1984). In ELT, knowledge is viewed as the transaction between two forms of knowledge: social knowledge, which is co-constructed in a socio-historical context, and personal knowledge, the subjective experience of the learner.

**Figure 1**

*A basic model of Kolb's Learning Cycle*



Progressing through the Learning Cycle is a continuous process as, through the testing of newfound ideas, the learner gathers further information through experience, thus cycling back to the beginning of the process. The process does not necessarily begin with experience, however. The progress through the Learning Cycle is circular, and the learner needs to “touch base” at all stages for learning to take place, but there is no set starting or finishing point. Instead, each learner can begin the circle where it suits them best. When learning a new skill, one individual may prefer to learn by observing and reflecting on someone performing a relevant task, while another would rather read and analyse instructions, and yet another might prefer to simply go ahead and try the task at hand.

### Purpose

The purpose of the study was to increase knowledge and understanding of Equine Assisted Interventions (EAI) by exploring key factors and aspects of interaction in a Therapeutic Horsemanship program for disadvantaged Young People.

### Research Questions

- What are the characteristics of interaction in the intervention?
- What factors are perceived or experienced as key for the intervention?

### Definitions and Central Terms

For the purpose of the study at hand, the following definitions are applied:

- *Young Person/People (YP)*: An individual/individuals of an age between eight and eighteen.

- *Equine*: An individual of the horse family, e.g., horse, pony, mule or donkey; or an item or phenomenon connected with or related to these.
- *Equine Assisted Intervention (EAI)*: A structured program that intentionally incorporates equines in areas relating to physical or mental human health, education, development or wellbeing. Can have a purpose to prevent, improve or preserve.
- *Therapeutic Horsemanship (TH)*: Goal oriented, planned, so called groundwork (i.e., non-ridden / unmounted) activities with equines, such as handling, care and training. The activities may be therapeutic for the participant, but are not therapy in the sense of being part of a larger treatment plan and provided by a licenced therapist.

## Methodology

The methodology chosen was qualitative, with an exploratory ethnographic approach. This choice was made as the aim was to capture central features, experiences, processes, perspectives and subjective meanings in Equine Assisted Interventions (EAI), and an approach combining semi-structured interviews and reflections from participants and different staff with researcher observations could serve as a triangulation of measures (Dell et al., 2011). Ethnography has been suggested as particularly useful for childhood studies, as it allows the collection, or production, of data to have more child participation and (direct) voice (James & Prout, 1997), and as suitable for small-scale research of an interpretive nature, using a variety of data sources (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; O'Reilly, 2012). Ethnography requires the observation and subsequent description of people behaving in routine ways in their natural social settings (Iphofen et al., 2009), it is anchored in lived experience rather than theory, and generally takes a holistic approach which emphasizes connections, relationships and interdependency among the components (Denscombe, 2014; Willis & Trondman, 2000). As the aim for the study at hand was not to generate wider generalisations, but to explore unique features and interaction in a specific context, an ethnographic approach was considered to be a suitable strategy.

Data was collected through a field study based on two main data collection methods: participant observation and semi-structured interviews. An overview of the data can be found in Appendix A<sup>3</sup>. Participative ethnography and variations of observation - interview combinations have been applied in similar research settings, which suggested this as a suitable approach for the study (e.g., Burgon, 2011; Carlsson, et al., 2014; Saggars & Strachan, 2016). Combining different data collection methods within the qualitative approach could increase validity and reliability, by confirming findings made through one method through findings of another. When used as a

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<sup>3</sup> Appendix B. Table of Acquired Data

within-method triangulation it also offered a possibility to get different perspectives of the same phenomenon, such as child and adult perspectives, thus allowing for a deeper understanding as described by Fangen (2005) and Streubert & Carpenter (2010). Including representatives from the network surrounding the participating young people could provide a wider picture. Within-method triangulation was therefore chosen as a research strategy, not only for the purpose of a deeper understanding, but also to minimise possible bias, cross-checking for internal consistency and increase completeness, credibility, and validity of the findings. By combining participant observations and semi-structured interviews, and including different stakeholders, validity and reliability of the research could be strengthened.

## Participants

All participants in the study were selected by convenience sampling. As the beginning of the field study coincided with the start of a new block of sessions in the program, this provided a natural selection and all YP and practitioners involved in this block were informed about the study and invited to take part. The main sample consisted of YP and practitioners; the ones who were taking an active part in the program and who were subsequently observed or interviewed several times. Of the ten YP participating in the relevant block of sessions, eight gave consent to participate in the study: six females and two males, between the ages of eight and eighteen. In the Saturday Club meetings, the number of attending YP varied between two and five. The practitioners were all adults; two females and one male. To get multiple perspectives of the intervention, representatives from each of the categories volunteers, referrers, parents/guardians and trustees were added to the main sample. All five of these were adult females.

## Data Collection: Participant Observations

**Table 1**  
*Observations*

Type of data	Quantity	Type of documentation
Observations	Total 29	
TH Sessions	24	Film (6) Film + photos (5) Sketched field notes (4) Field notes (23)
Saturday Club	3	Photos + Field notes
Starfish Sessions	2	Field notes

The field study can be described as taking place in the studied culture's natural setting; mainly focused on the corral and round pen, but occasionally also in the small stable building, the horses' fields and the farmhouse. TH/groundwork sessions in the Penyttrip project were the main focus for the participant observations, augmented by observations of Saturday Club and Starfish sessions. To give the participants time to get used to researcher presence and minimise the risk of this presence affecting usual behaviour, the study started out with overt but passive observations, made from a small, three-sided shed at one side of the corral. This gradually developed into active observations over time, to participation in sessions both from a

practitioner view, and as a YP by experiencing my own mock session. In the Saturday Club observations, I participated more in the capacity of volunteer than researcher, taking active part in the proceedings. This strategy enabled a larger quantity of direct field notes to be taken in the beginning of the study, providing a foundation for reflections and understanding for the later parts when active observations and participation required notes to be taken ex post facto.

Observations were documented by combinations of written and sketched field notes, video recordings and photographs, depending on the session in question. Timewise, the observations followed the framework of the sessions, with some extra time for preparation, and therefore lasted approximately an hour. The number of observed sessions per YP ranged between one and five. The field notes did not follow a set protocol, they can be described as semi-structured; noting time, date, participants, location, circumstances such as weather and occurrences such as other people, vehicles or animals in the vicinity. Events, conversations, noted phenomena, actions and incidents were noted, together with observer comments, thoughts and reflections and on some occasions a preliminary analysis. The field notes were done by hand in a notebook, and the collected notes amounted to approximately 110 hand-written pages.

## Data Collection: Interviews

**Table 2**  
*Interviews*

Type of data	Quantity	Type of documentation, additional comments
Interviews	Total 13	
Practitioners	3	Individual interviews (2) Group discussions (2+3 subjects) Recorded + notes, complements via e-mail
Referrers	2	Recorded + notes
Young Person	5	Notes (1) At last session via staff, results e-mailed (4)
Volunteer	1	Notes
Parents/Guardians	1	Interview + subsequent e-mail
Trustee	1	Part of group discussion + subsequent e-mail

To provide room for the respondents to explain and express themselves more freely, the interviews were semi-structured, with a core of basic questions which could be adjusted to each specific interview. This allowed for follow-up questions, for the interview to flow and develop depending on the respondent and the situation, and a more in-depth understanding of the subjects' perceptions, experiences, thoughts and emotions. The questions were aimed at understanding the respondent's relation to the program, and initiating discussion of pros, cons, and possible effects of the program. As the study was of an exploratory nature, a definite set of questions was not decided beforehand. The interviews were conducted either in the farmhouse's project office, kitchen or drawing room, and were documented by notes and/or audio recordings with permission from each respondent. Two interviews with adult respondents were conducted through a combination of live communication and e-mail, and two were in the form of group discussions, with two and three respondents respectively. One YP was interviewed during their block of sessions, while four YP were interviewed by staff in connection with their last sessions. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours, and the respondents represented the

various roles connected to the program; YP, practitioners, support persons, parents/guardians, referrers, volunteers and trustees. After transcription, the interview documentation amounted to approximately 125 typed pages.

### Ethical Considerations

An undergraduate thesis does not require ethical approval, nevertheless possible ethical concerns were discussed with representatives from University West during the planning of the study to ensure good and ethical research practice and adhere to the principles of autonomy, beneficence and justice (Streubert & Carpenter, 2010). During the actual field study, the ethical guidelines of the organisation were followed. As the YP participating in the program were under the age of 18, informed consent was obtained from both YP and parent/guardian. Prior to starting the program, YP and parent/guardian filled in, among other things, a form stating whether the participant was willing to have their session documented in photo or video for information leaflets, commercial or awareness raising material etc. A specific consent form<sup>4</sup> was added to this process, where YP and parent/guardian were informed about the study, and by ticking boxes on the consent form could state if, and to what extent, the YP wanted to take part. One YP gave consent with the reservation of not wanting to be photographed or filmed, while the rest of the consenting YP had no reservations. Keeping with the organisation's policy, where no adult is ever to be alone with a YP out of sight of another adult, at least one member of staff was present whenever I was near any of the YP. The decision to allow the field study to take place was made by the organisation's Board of Trustees. Every practitioner, assistant and volunteer with the organisation had to submit a Criminal Records Registry extract, and a Swedish Police Authority's Criminal Record Registry extract was submitted to the Board of Trustees on my behalf. To protect the integrity of the participants in the study, no human names are used, and reasons for referral are only described in general terms. The exact time period for the field study is not disclosed.

*Participant observations* are connected with possible ethical dilemmas or considerations, such as the researcher inevitably affecting and influencing the situation with their presence, (Fangen, 2005), and that the researcher's own experiences and emotions affect the interpretation and thereby also the result (Fangen, 2005; Niemi, 2010). Both of these aspects make reflexivity an important factor to ensure good and ethical research practice. The participant observations did not start until consent had been given by YP and parent/guardian. Four of the YP had not given consent prior to their first session, wherefore observations of their sessions did not take place until one or two weeks into the block. Each session began with practitioners introducing me and reminding the YP of the reason for my presence. The YP were reminded of their right to withdraw from the project altogether, or to choose not to have researcher presence in a particular session or particular activity.

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<sup>4</sup> Appendix C. Consent Form



The *interviews* took place toward the end of the field study, to give respondents time to get used to the ongoing study and researcher presence, and to make the situation as natural and comfortable as possible. Location for the interviews varied, depending on other activities in and around the house at the time, but were always conducted in places which were familiar to the interviewee, who was also given the opportunity to change location or postpone the interview. Thus the interviews were conducted in a setting which is familiar to both parts, but could be seen as being on the subject's "home turf", in their environment (Langston et. al., 2004). Prior to all interviews, the study was described, and the respondent reminded of their right to confidentiality and anonymity, to withdraw at any point and to pass on answering questions without giving a reason. Interviews were only recorded with permission from the respondents, and contact information for the researcher was provided. At the YP interview, a member of staff was present.

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Convenience sampling meant that every YP participating in the program at the time of the study was invited to also participate in the study, wherefore there was no deliberate inclusion or exclusion of YP based on gender, background, social situation, or specific issues. As the program was designed for individuals between the ages of eight and eighteen, this became a natural age limit for the participating YP. Participating adults were over the age of eighteen. YP and practitioners were invited to participate in both participant observations and interviews. Referrers, parents/guardians, support persons and volunteers were invited to participate in interviews. Referrers, parents/guardians, support persons and volunteers were either suggested by the organisation as they were considered likely to be interested in participating, and comfortable in declining if not interested, or approached during the study as they appeared interested or suitable. Due to the location of the organisation, the setting for the field study came to be a rural one, though both YP and adult participants came from varying backgrounds, circumstances and locations.

### Analysis

The data from the field study was analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021). Thematic Analysis is a way to identify, analyse and report patterns and themes within, or across, qualitative data. Reflexive Thematic Analysis emphasises researcher subjectivity and the researcher's central and active role in all stages of the process, and was chosen as it is recommended when the researcher does not intend to develop a theory but rather identify, describe, and interpret patterns in data, due to the approach being flexible and straightforward and containing less complex procedures than, for example, Grounded Theory (Braun & Clarke 2021). It is further recommended for new or inexperienced researchers, being accessible and reasonably easy even with little or no experience of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke (2006, 2021), and can be applied to find answers to both broad and narrow research questions regarding individuals' experiences, perceptions and views, which is another reason why it was considered suitable for the study at hand, to produce results reflecting the multi-faceted nature of EAI. Reflexive Thematic Analysis is also useful for summarizing large bodies of data, developing results that generally are accessible to an educated general public (Braun & Clarke, (2006). As there is a growing interest in research on various aspects of EAI from a diverse population of both researchers and practitioners, the level of accessibility in



the research was an important factor. Variations of Thematic Analysis have been applied in research projects with features in common with the present study, (e.g., Burgon, 2011; Hemingway et al., 2015; Kern-Godal et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2017), which further suggested this as a suitable approach.

To explore key factors and characteristics of interaction in the intervention, an inductive approach was applied where the process of coding was guided by the data content, without aims to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this analysis process, codes tend to be more specific than themes, and can be conceptualised as the building blocks that, when combined, create themes. Multiple codes are generally combined in the process (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and a theme can be described as capturing “stories about particular patterns of shared meaning across the dataset” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 592). The term *data set* refers to all data from a particular research project that are being used for a particular analysis, and for this analysis the data set consisted of transcribed interviews, field notes and reflections.

The analysis was aimed at understanding/identifying what conceptual aspects can be perceived as key factors in the intervention, and to identify characteristics of interaction. Patterns were identified through a process of data familiarisation, coding, theme development and revision, working through six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006): getting familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, refining and naming themes and eventually producing a report. The analysis process began with the recorded interviews, which were listened to multiple times and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were reread several times, to identify central elements, phenomena that stood out, possible patterns etc. Next, the same process of data familiarisation was repeated with the field notes and reflections. Similar elements and phenomena could be noted in data from both observations and interviews, and from this stage on, data from the two data collection methods was analysed together.

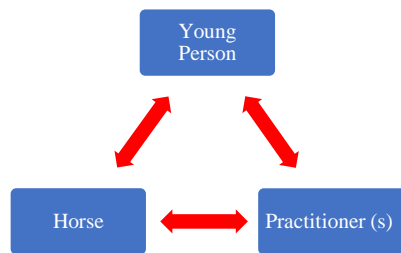
A detailed, manual coding of noted elements and phenomena resulted in a total of 58 initial codes. These codes were reworked and condensed several times over to identify various possible connections, patterns or common denominators. The next step explored possible relationships between the initial codes and collated them into potential themes, which were then reviewed in relation to the entire data set, generating a number of possible thematic maps. Each theme was then analysed and refined, in an attempt to generate clear definitions, establish which thematic map was most representative, and work out symbolic names for each theme. During the final writing process, the themes were yet again reviewed and condensed, through the selection of extract examples relating back to the research questions and purpose of the study.

## Results

Interaction can be described as the foundation for the whole intervention. It was found to primarily take place within, and in relation to, a relational triad between YP, practitioner(s) and horse. This triad can be understood through the general shape of a triangle, with the actors placed at the vertices, or corners, as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*Interaction in the Triad Child-Practitioner(s)-Horse*



This image of interaction was something that appeared most clearly in the participant observations, but the same image could be traced also through the interviews. The triangle shape is not a constant, symmetrical one, as closeness and dynamics between the actors fluctuates during sessions as well as during the intervention as a whole.

The thematic analysis resulted in a total of eight themes, organised in two main groups: *Framework Themes* and *Content Themes*, as described in Table 3. The themes are presented in detail below, illustrated by quotes from interviews and extracts from field notes. Practitioners are identified as P, researcher as M, individual YP as X and volunteers as V. For interviews with more than one practitioner present, the practitioners are referred to as P1, P2 and P3. Horses' names are unchanged. Subjects' phrases, choice of words and spelling are unedited.

**Table 3**

*Framework Themes and Content Themes*

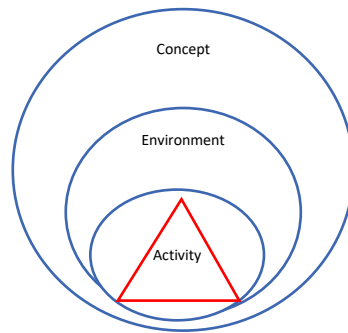
Framework Themes	Content Themes
Concept	Safe Spaces
Environment	Helping Horses
Activity	Positive Perceptions
	Communication is Key
	Learning for Life

## Framework Themes

The Framework Themes are *Concept*, *Environment* and *Activity*. They are the prerequisites for the interaction in the triad, as well as in the intervention as a whole. They constitute a structure surrounding the relational triangle between child, practitioner and horse in which interaction takes place, enabling and affecting said interaction as illustrated in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*Interaction Triad within the Framework Themes*



### *Concept*

The *Concept* represents the specific way the intervention is organised, and the methods which are used: from structure and routines to approach and ethos. The *Concept* provides a safe, secure, professional, consistent and predictable framework, which emerges as an important prerequisite for the intervention as a whole. Professionalism and competence are essential in the *Concept*, and one prominent part is the ethos of the rescue horse work, together with the aim to establish a connection between human and horse rather than the human being undisputed leader or boss. Specific rules and routines guide the whole chain from referral and planning to implementation and evaluation. Rules for safe and polite behaviour apply to everyone involved, in and around sessions. The intervention is monitored and evaluated throughout, and staff on all levels, including the equines, receive continuous training, evaluation and support.

Activities in each specific session vary, depending on the YP's individual goals, but the *Concept* is the same for all YP and sessions follow the same basic structure. One lead practitioner (focusing on the YP), one assistant practitioner (focusing on the equine) and usually one equine (horse or pony) make up the team that will work together with the YP throughout their block of sessions. This enables a predictable process which can lessen issues like anxiety or challenging behaviour, leaving more energy to focus on the activities at hand. As far as possible, this setup will remain unchanged and in case of illness etc., a session will more likely be postponed than completed with temporary practitioners:

What we've found is that... the bond with the horse is probably the most important thing. But then they do also need... a consistency, really, from the practitioners, I think. For most kids, they want to know who's gonna be there, what they're gonna be like, if it's gonna be different from last week... And I think, when we've *had* to change practitioners for...like if someone's been ill or.../.../ I don't find that the kids benefit from that, usually. I think they find... they kind of go backwards and then /.../ I used to have different assistants. But now I try to keep that consistent, 'cause I found that even different assistants would change the dynamic and we'd have... a kid who'd been very challenging and then we'd work through it, they'd be fine and then we'd have another assistant, and they'd just: "oh, what about this person,

how challenging can I be now?” And what we found with it, it was better to keep everything the same and just do a different activity (laughs) /.../ I think it's important... that they know where they stand, and that... they know that... that things aren't just going to change. Because for some of them, I think, they don't want to come for the first session, 'cause they don't know what's gonna happen. And that's really scary for them. So if we can make it so as much as possible they know what's going to happen for every... session after that, it makes them more... receptive and they want to come because they feel safe, and... But if they think “next time, there could be anybody here, I don't know who they are, I don't know what they're going to ask of me”, that can be quite frightening, I think. (Extract from interview with practitioner)

Reliability is an essential part of the *Concept*, for physical as well as psychological safety and trust. Everyone involved needs to be able to trust the others to try their best to keep both humans and horses safe. Times and promises are to be kept, and the YP need to be able to trust the practitioners to follow through on their word. As participation is voluntary, it also means that following rules are voluntary; deliberately and constantly choosing not to do so will have consequences as the YP will not be allowed to continue their participation.

Discipline, I think...there's no messing. You know, they... straight away you know where you stand. I think that's important to them. /.../ You know, P is quite stern, and that's... you've got to be, from the day one, and that's important, I think. There's no...and she'll repeat it if, you know, any... bad language, or you know, nothing's...she will be, you know, she will be consistent. And they value that, I think, the kids here. 'Cause they don't get that at home, do they? /.../ they know where they stand from day one, the kids, when they are coming here. That's what I've seen anyway, you know? (Extract from interview with referrer)

Further essential aspects in the *Concept* are ethos and congruence. Practitioner congruence toward everyone involved, human and animal alike, appear to be of importance for a safe and positive experience. Active facilitation appears to be omnipresent, and all practitioners appear to share the same ethos which permeates the whole intervention. Sessions have a setup which enables successful results for the YP in each specific activity, and end on a positive note, pointing out progress and success as well as room for improvement through “two stars and a wish”: identifying two things that went well, and one thing that might be something to work more on next time.

### *Environment*

The *Environment* is twofold. There is the physical space where activities take place, the location and its surrounding *environment*; and there is the psychological environment and atmosphere: the *milieu*.

The environment surrounding the location offers spectacular views of a beach and the Irish Sea to one side and rolling green hills with grazing sheep and mountains in the distance to the other. Situated high on a hilltop, at the end of a narrow winding road, the location is exposed to the elements which enables a wide variety of sensory impressions and a sense of being close to nature. The location is pointed out as both an asset and a drawback: the remote location offers privacy, beauty, closeness to nature and a sense of being away from everyday life while at the same time being inaccessible, as there is no public transport and YP have to rely on the adult world for transport and support in getting to their sessions. The physical workspace is where the sessions take place. It exists beyond classrooms and regular learning environments, both physical and psychological. Being outdoors, it offers space and air, while fencing provides clear physical boundaries. Specific smaller spaces can be created, depending on the purpose: the

corral contains an enclosed round pen, and even smaller spaces can be made with poles, cones, tarpaulins, etc.

The equine environment is natural and “un-constructed” and there is a novelty to the situation which can make it motivating and enjoyable. It is a stark contrast to more traditional environments for therapy, treatment or education, which can be perceived as artificial and have a focus on the YP, which for some individuals can cause issues such as performance anxiety. In the words of one YP: “It’s different than conceling [sic] or talking with teachers” (YP).

The equine milieu offers a sense of purpose and coherence. Equine management is surrounded by routines and rules which are generally logical and understandable. The rescue horse ethos moves focus from the YP on to the horse, and by helping with rehabilitation and training of the horses, the YP often acquires skills without consciously realising it. Central in the milieu is a positive view of the capability of both YP and horse. The atmosphere is described as friendly and welcoming, homely as opposed to institutional, and the combination of people, horses, environment and concept/structure is pointed out as important: “It's definitely working, but I can't pinpoint what. It's a combination of things really, the whole...package” (Referrer). Accessibility is pointed out as another important factor, from both a mental and a physical perspective:

P1: I know a lot of the kids that we get because of their behaviour are often told no, “you can't stay at school, because you're disrupting the other children, you can't go to this place, cause no one wants to see you” ... and they... they're so used to have these doors slammed at them, and they come here and even when there *really* bad (laughs) we still say “Oh, OK, we can work with you”. /.../ Yeah, I think it's... It's nice that, you know, if they've been excluded from other things that... they're included in this.

P3: Well, that's the one... the reason we work one on one with them, because it means we can take anybody on, really. Because you've got two adults, there's one kid, pretty much anything that they come at you with, you can deal with if you've got that ratio. (Extract from interview with practitioners)

### *Activity*

The *Activity* is the practical, hands-on, goal oriented core of the intervention. It refers to organised activities as well as concrete action from the participants. This action may be low key, such as mindfulness exercises, or high key, like loose schooling, but they all entail some level of engagement from the YP. Milestones are set up together with the YP, as well as smaller goals for each session. These are identified in the beginning of the block of sessions, recorded in a “goal post document”, where goals are represented by groundwork poles. There are usually three: a short-term goal that the YP would like to have accomplished in a few weeks’ time; a medium-term goal that the YP would like to have accomplished by the end of their block; and a long term, future goal. While the objectives for each session are set by the practitioners, there will always be elements of choice and decisions for the YP related to the *Activity*; from choosing which brush to use for grooming to what layout and items to use to construct an obstacle course or what goals to work toward in their next session. Concrete objects or occurrences are used to illustrate abstract phenomena, e.g., an obstacle symbolising a difficult or frightening place or event in the YPs life.

The *Activity* can be described as having three sub-categories: the verbal, the visual, and the physical/ kinaesthetic, as the YP gets to hear about, see, and then try each activity together with

the horse. Activities with the horse, or in the horse’s environment, offer physical training such as coordination and motor skills: carrying equipment, grooming a horse, or closing the buckles on a headcollar all require different physical abilities. In and around the *Activity* there is constant communication, verbal as well as non-verbal. Activities and events are explained, demonstrated, tried, evaluated and pointed out or illustrated. There is room for initiative, choice, reflection, trial and error, creativity, success and accomplishment.

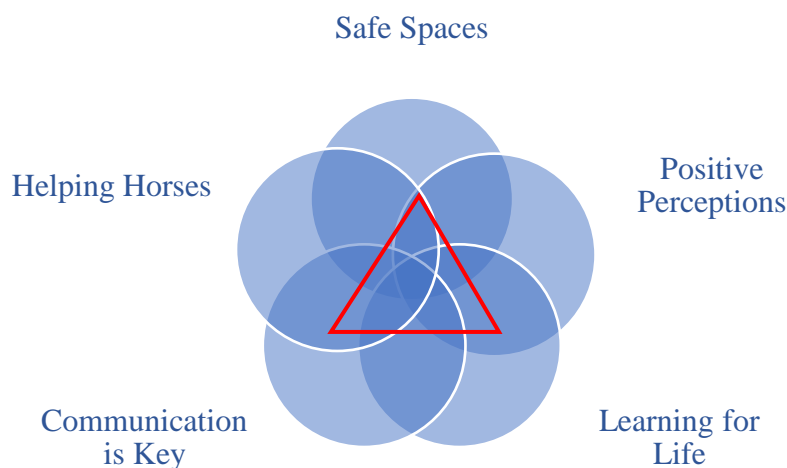
P cheers on when YP builds obstacle course, says she’s YP’s “dogbody basically, it’s entirely up to you how you handle it” Summary when the course is ready: you decided quickly, did you know what you wanted? Yes. Did you ask for help a lot? No. Are you like that in life, do you decide? Yes. Do you ask for help? No. I don’t want to bother anyone. P cheerfully says “OK”, no judgement in the tone of voice, more like a light statement. After the trial run together with the horse, they discuss what worked less well. “Would you have known that without trying?” No. YP then makes adjustments to the course and tries again. P: “Good, you saved that straight away, so it’s as good for the horse as possible. And the good thing is that if it doesn’t work now, we can redo it again”. (Edited extract from field notes)

### Content Themes

The *Content Themes* are found within the *Framework Themes*. They are broad, interrelated and of equal importance, and they permeate the whole intervention, from organisation and structure to activities and processes. They thereby also surround and permeate the triad, affecting and enabling interaction as illustrated in Figure 4.

**Figure 4**

*Interaction Triad Within the Content Themes*



### *Safe Spaces*

The *Safe Spaces* relate to physical and mental safety, for everyone involved. Safety is essential throughout the intervention and is a subject which was brought up by several of the respondents: “I would like to point out the safety aspect at WITH. I always feel horses and humans’ safety is paramount at all times without ‘wrapping people up in cotton wool’” (Trustee). Horses and ponies are thoroughly assessed before they are included in work with the YP, to ensure that they are suitable for the intervention. Once involved in the program, they are closely monitored to ensure both physical and mental wellbeing, which is essential for them to be good and safe

work partners with the YP. If a horse should show signs of discomfort, disinterest or burnout, it will have time off from participating in the intervention and instead do other activities depending on the preferences for each equine individual.

In order for the activities to be safe and successful, they all require an awareness about such aspects, which provides the YP with a context in which to learn about risk assessment and safety. Rules and safe behaviour are described, discussed and explained, as are potential consequences: Why is it unsafe to stand behind the horse? Why is it unsafe to have a lead rope trailing on the ground? Why shouldn't we pick up horse droppings with our hands (for some reason, this is the one rule that all the YP seem to remember without difficulty)? What might happen if we did? Risky or unsafe behaviour is pointed out and questioned, from a non-judgemental, YP perspective: "I know that you know not to do this or that, why do you feel a need to do it anyway?", instead of "That's wrong!" While there is flexibility and room for improvisation within the session context, the basic rules are non-negotiable. They can be found on display around the premises and are repeated at the beginning of every session (in parts or as a whole, depending on the YP) and if needed also during the session.

P1: We allow kids to take risks, I don't like to /.../ *never* let children take risks, 'cause I think they learn by taking... controlled risks. /.../ But, the risks we let them take are risks that we know... can pay off in a positive way and that they are not..., you know, the risk isn't that if you do it wrong, you're going to get seriously hurt. I think there's a safe risk that you can take, and it's about that.

P3: A big part about that is actually learning to take those risks for themselves, 'cause I mean, you can't go through your life without taking some risks, and you have to learn to take those risks, but choose which risks are appropriate to take and which ones aren't.

P1: I think as well for some of our kids, they maybe don't feel safe anywhere else... so, actually it's more important for them... to have helmets and... feel protected, than it is for kids who have quite nice happy family lives and don't [inaudible] or appreciate it (laughs). /.../ And we've have had that with kids, I think, who actually... /---/ I think, for some of them they want that kind of... for an adult to care about them, enough to want them to be safe. And when you say "Please put your helmet on, because I want you to be safe", it means something more than just, you know, "Put your helmet on!" /---/ I've had one... who was just taking silly risks at one bit and I said to him, you know "Why... why do you feel like you need to do this?" Cause I think it was things like walking behind the horse when he didn't... you know, he *knew* that he wasn't supposed to do it, but did it anyway, "Why keep doing that, because I know you know that... you're not supposed to do it, that it's not safe". And he said: "Why are you constant... why are you always telling me to be safe, why are you *constantly* wanting me to be safe?" And I said: "Because I care about you!" And then he never did it again. (Extract from interview with practitioners)

Respect and choice for the individual are important, regardless of how many legs the individual has. There is room for emotions, thoughts, feelings, actions, backgrounds, dreams, fears and plans, and to "be who you are" in that moment. The YP is not forced or expected to talk about difficult things; the reasons behind the referral are known and acknowledged, but not central. If the YP wants to talk about difficult things, strategies are employed to prevent such disclosures or conversations venturing into the realm of therapy. Instead, focus will be directed toward the horse and toward a practical approach, such as developing strategies for coping with potentially difficult situations: "The main thing is not going into therapist territory. If so, say: 'Thanks so much for telling me this, it's good to know that you feel you can share it. Let's see how we can use this to work today...'" (Practitioner). If a YP becomes sad or upset, focus is directed onto the horse, instead of the practitioner: "I can see that this makes you upset. Do you want to take a minute and go hug your horse?" The horse is often regarded as a friend or ally: offering safety,

comfort and support. Safety and wellbeing include YP, staff and horses. Ensuring the horses' wellbeing is a way to ensure better safety for everyone involved:

... 'cause I think you can, you can do a session that is very successful for a child, and actually not for the horse. The horse maybe leaves it feeling scared or confused, and then the thing with that is, when they come back in they don't want to work because they're scared of that happening again, and it doesn't make a good therapy horse. (Extract from interview with practitioner)

Safe footwear, helmet and sometimes gloves are mandatory for the YP, while helmets are optional for adult volunteers and for practitioners. For other clothing, there is room for individuals to "be who they want to be" also in terms of outfits: during the study YP participated in sessions wearing everything from tractor overalls to flowery dresses. Practitioners do not generally wear traditional or typical equestrian wear, so as not to emphasize distance and difference between YP and practitioners.

Documents regarding the YP are only available to staff, YP are not discussed with other participants, and there is time allowed between sessions to ensure that two YP are not present on the premises at the same time.

There is a "dual accessibility" in the *Safe Spaces*, offering not only physical and psychological access but also inclusion, in that the organisation accepts many YP who for various reasons have not been able or allowed to participate in other programs, or for whom other interventions have not worked:

P1: I think, as well, as one of the big pros is, it works for people for whom other types of therapy or... intervention have failed. And we see that... a lot. Especially this week, we've seen quite a few... parents saying that "we've tried... these different things, we feel like we've tried everything and we are here because we can't do anything else". So, for us that... It's quite nice to know that... it works even for kids that have... been resistant to therapy, even. Or not been able to do psychotherapy, because they can't sit down and talk. Or they won't sit down and talk and....

P3: we purposely have a very... We call them disadvantaged, because... /.../ it encompasses such a *broad* spectrum of things. So we've got financial disadvantage, social, disadvantage, physical disadvantage... Basically any way you can say there's something you're finding difficult. We will take... we will take you on.

P1: And we have had kids that are... *too* disabled for riding ponies, they've all been able to do this, haven't they?

V: Yeah.

P1: They've been turned away and told "you can't ride, 'cause you're too disabled". And then... If even Riding for the Disabled says that to you, then it's kind of like... /.../ Where does that go and how do you feel about your disability then, when people say -even this organisation that set up for disability can't take you- /.../ But because it... a lot of it is on the ground and you really don't have to move unless you want to, I think... We've had a couple of kids who... really didn't have very good motor skills or actually couldn't walk., and still be able to do it. /---/ I think a lot of those kids are used to being told that you can't do this, you can't do that, it's not safe for you to do this. Or a girl -we had a girl who was blind and deaf, didn't we, on this project? /.../ Who was able to participate but wasn't allowed to do anything really: she couldn't get on the bus, she couldn't cross the road, she couldn't do sports at school and... She was just used to people saying no, no, no... And she came here for assessment, and I think she was thinking "You're probably going to tell me I can't do this". So she was like Oh! I *can* do it!?

P3: ...and she smiled for the next couple of weeks. (Extract from group interview with practitioners and volunteer/trustee)



Not offering riding is a deliberate choice, as groundwork is considered more accessible and inclusive:

...and you get that sometimes: “and they’re not even riding so what can they get out of this experience? It’s just like standing around on the ground with a horse”. In some ways I think that makes it more accessible, ‘cause.../.../ I think riding is...not as inclusive as...not everybody *can* ride, not everybody wants to, and it takes a lot longer than six weeks to feel comfortable riding. But like groundwork; even if you can’t walk, or even if you’re really scared, there are things you can do. And even if you can’t communicate very well. So it includes everyone and I think that is what groundwork has. But people look at it and go “it’s nothing, it’s just a horse and a rug” (laughs). (Extract from interview with practitioner)

The *Safe Spaces* offer room for each individual to practice social interaction in a manner and pace that suits them, and everyone can participate according to their own abilities:

Practitioner and YP speak about Saturday Club, discussing whether helping out there might be something for the YP: “I’m not very good with kids”. “That’s OK, the kids are not very good with people, so...” (Extract from field notes of session evaluation)

### *Helping Horses*

This theme relates to “help” that goes both ways. The YP help train and rehabilitate the horses, and the horses help the YP in their process of working toward both their own and the horses’ goals.

The young people that I refer get the opportunity to see... help something improve. It’s so nice for them, ‘cause very often in their life they *can’t* improve, and they don’t know *how* to, so having the opportunity to help something and to see it make a marked improvement was so good for them. And P will always make a point of that. Saying you know the horse really likes that, it must like you, and that just makes them feel so good I think. /.../ And you know, they don’t get enough of that at home, certainly not the ones that... come from our referral agency. (Extract from interview with referrer)

I really like the way the focus was taken off the participants and onto helping the horses, all participants are made to feel special and made to feel they are making a difference to the horses, not just by P, but by the horses too, amazing to see. It always moves me when you see the face of the most troubled participants when the horse joins up with them, fantastic to see them leave with beaming smiles. (Extract from interview with trustee/volunteer)

The YP help to rehabilitate the horses, learning about horsemanship and acquiring equine knowledge; and through this also learning about themselves. The YP gets a chance to take responsibility and feel that they are contributing to something good, while the interaction with the horses offers a way to learn and develop new ways of thinking and behaving. As communicating with a horse is different than communicating with a human, the YP is encouraged to reflect on and try out different alternative communication strategies and methods. Strategies to help the horse may be useful strategies also for the YP:

Girl is walking through obstacle course with small pony. All goes well -next step is making one of the obstacles symbolise a difficulty. She struggles to get to school, and with help from practitioner, this is broken down in smaller steps and getting the bus to school is identified as one of the first obstacles. When they get to the obstacle in question, they come to a halt. “What’s the problem?” “He doesn’t want to walk over it”. “Why, do you think?” “I think he is a bit afraid of it”. (pony shows no signs of fear or discomfort) “OK, so what do you think you can do about that?” “Make him feel better”. /.../ YP spends some time with the pony by the obstacle, then decides it’s time for a new attempt. There is some hesitation, but eventually they get over it. “Well done! What made it work this time?” “I made him feel less afraid of it”. “Great, what did you do?” “I gave him time and support so he didn’t have to feel like he was alone and helped him get in a calm mode”. “Brilliant, how did you do that?” “I distracted him with a few scratches to take his mind off it and talked calmly to him to encourage him”. “That’s really clever, it

worked!... Do you think any of those things might help you to feel brave enough to try to get to the bus stop? Small steps, distraction, support..?” There’s a quiet moment, and you can almost see a light bulb switch on. “I could try”. /---/ she comes back for the next session, and when asked, reports that not only has she managed the bus stop, but actually managed to get as far as the school gates, which is a huge thing. Lots of praise. “How did you do that? “When I became afraid and anxious, I thought about Noah and what I would do if he was there and needed help”. (Edited extract from field notes and reflections)

The importance of the bond with the horses is emphasised by both YP and adults. When asked what is special about the intervention, several YP answer similarly:

Creating a bond with the horses.

Bonding with horses.

Getting to see horses. You don’t randomly get to work with a horse, it’s a once in a lifetime thing, not every kid can do it.

Lots of horses. Sprout -magic horse.

There appears to often be a question of trusting and bonding with a particular horse, rather than just any horse. The organisation’s ethos of working with rescue horses means that the horses’ varying backgrounds and personalities provide multiple opportunities for participants with different backgrounds and experiences to relate to specific horses, on several levels:

He had all these experiences that kids could relate to. Amazing, and even his scars and stuff, kids would look at him and be like oh, you know, I’ve got a scar, and... (Extract from interview with practitioner)

I don’t really know why (laughs)... it wasn’t related to anything we were saying to her... but I don’t know if, sometimes when they see that... the horses have... fears, or weaknesses, they kind of go “Okay, well I’m not the only one”. I don’t know. But I’ll just note that: the desensitising Missy to the wand seemed quite important to X. (Extract from session evaluation)

The variety of horses also offers possibilities when combining individuals for successful sessions. A specific equine individual is chosen for each YP, on grounds of personality and experiences of them both. For this combination to be safe and successful, it is of utmost importance that practitioners know their individual horses well enough to know who to combine with whom. The experience for both YP and horse can be challenging but should never be distressing.

I think /.../ sometimes people think it’s ridiculous, even horse persons, because like with X and Tilly, if you said you’re going to combine this really anxious child with a horse who’s really nervous and you think “That’s ridiculous, why would you do that?” (laughs) But if I’d said “I’m going to combine this child with a horse who is really calm and placid” it would be easier for X but she wouldn’t learn anything. ‘Cause the horse would do it all for her, you know. It’s a nice experience with a calm horse, but it doesn’t really accomplish anything. With Tilly, she’s learned now that starting she has to be in a calm place, and she has to do the breathing, she’s using those skills now at school and so she knows that “before I start, I need to be calm and...” you can’t learn that with a horse who is the opposite. (Extract from interview with practitioner)

The horse functions as a focal point and working partner through its rehabilitation or training, which can be perceived by some YP as a parallel process, where they work together toward their respective goals:

When writing goals on the Goal Post documents, X is adamant that the goals should be identified the same way for both her and “her” horse, and they’re put on the same paper. It illustrates the parallel learning/training for the two. (Extract from field notes and reflections)

The horse as well as its environment offer insights through symbols and metaphors. Working together with the horse offers the YP experiences which can clarify issues and possible solutions both in the sessions and outside the equine context. The individual horse can provide something for the YP to relate to in as well as outside the sessions:

...female YP builds an obstacle course which she then walks through together with her horse. A few of the obstacles are too narrow or too high for the horse to manoeuvre comfortably, so YP and practitioner make some adjustments. This time, it goes well. She then chooses three of the obstacles as symbols of difficulties in her life. The first one is a pole on the ground, which is made to symbolise lack of confidence. P: “I want you to visualise how you will feel when you overcome it. How will you talk to people, what will it be like?” Girl and horse walk the same course again. At the pole, they come to a halt. When the obstacle became a symbol for confidence, all of a sudden it doesn't work. P: “You have made it before, the only thing that didn't work was when it was too high”. They now talk about that specific obstacle. Body language, shoulders back, confident strides... “Has anything changed with the obstacle?” “No”. “The only thing is what it now represents. When you've got over it, I want you to stop and make a real fuss over it”. This time, they get over it, to cheers -and some tears- from everyone. (Edited extract from field notes from a YPs first session)

With my Police job I have also been lucky enough to meet participants after there [sic] sessions and be told how they use what they learnt when working with the horses. One girl who had problems with controlling her anger, said she now uses methods she learnt at WITH I have seen how much this has helped her. When speaking with her once she said she was struggling again a little, I was able to speak with her about how Missy would deal with such issues. Police have not been called to see her since. (Extract from mail interview with trustee)

The horses react and respond to things that happen both externally and internally for the YP, and they pick up on any incongruences. Horses do not have hidden agendas, meaning that through their authentic responses they provide accurate feedback, i.e. “tell the truth”:

The horses show up things whether we like it or not. /---/ Missy, if she does join-up sessions with somebody who's not very assertive, she'll go to the most assertive person in the round pen (laughs) so she'll be like “Well, *you're* not the boss, so who is?” Missy's really good because she'll go both ways. If you're not being assertive enough, she'll just stand there, and like, “Yeah, go on then, make me do it!” And if you are being too assertive, she will be super flighty and run out -or she will just plant her feet and stand still. So you *do* have to be really kind of balanced with Missy, to get her to work nicely. (Extract from interview with practitioner)

P1: Sometimes I do let kids pick their own horses. And I... It's quite useful at some points, 'cause the horses they pick can be quite revealing. About them. But one of the things you have to [inaudible] is resonance. And resonance is... there is something about that horse that relates to something about you. /.../ and that can be a good thing, it can be like, you know like YP to a horse that's anxious and she's anxious, and they learn together. And it can also be a bad thing. So if you're a person who's afraid of horses and a horse who is quite dominant that can be quite a scary situation. If you got somebody who has been abused, and a horse that is quite dominant, again it ends up just repeating old patterns in this kind of abuse or abusive... relationship, and they can't get out of it. So if you do that, I think you just have to be aware that the combinations that people pick aren't always the best. (Extract from group interview with practitioners and volunteer)

The horses are described as helping the YP to ground themselves, be less self-conscious, experience mindfulness and practicing awareness and being in the moment. Grooming and stroking a horse provides tactile input, and matching breaths or steps with the horse offers a

way to focus the senses. Combined with the calm surroundings, such exercises are described as helping the YP to be in the “here and now”.

### *Positive Perceptions*

This theme relates to “a happy place”, positive atmosphere and attitudes. A prominent phenomenon in interviews as well as field notes was a variety of positive emotions. “I look forward to coming here” (YP). These are recognised in YPs as well as practitioners, horses and parents/guardians, and cover a range from calm and content to happy and joyful:

P1: We got a lovely feedback from her mum, basically saying how she went away from every session buzzing. And you saw it with YP the other day, actually. She came, and she wasn't sad when she came, but she was much more, kind of withdrawn... and by the end of the session she had kind of got this big, massive grin on her face, and it's just that... positive experience, I think they all take away from them. 'Cause we always -every session that we do, we make sure that it's in some way positive for them. /.../ and it might be the only positive thing in their life. And we've had young people, like this person, they've come, and the rest of their life, it's hectic and it's stressful, and they come here and it's just calm and it's relaxing. And they get something really nice out of it. /.../ that's what I always think. It's much harder to measure their levels of confidence and whether that has increased or anything else that we work with. I mean, the goals we're.... the goals we're setting that kind of gives definite landmarks that we can work towards. But other than that, it's really hard to notice things but we always notice, well, I always notice their... level of happiness increasing.

P3: Particularly during each session, but also over the course of the sessions as well. (Extract from interview with practitioners)

The positive experiences for the YP are attributed to different factors, e.g., a feeling of forming a relationship or bond with the horse, helping with the horses' rehabilitation, achieving new competences, experiencing a new identity as a “horse person”, feeling confident and brave, daring to try new things and meet challenges (both in sessions and in their everyday life), reaching goals and overcoming mental or physical obstacles, while being outdoors and in a positive, non-judgemental environment.

...But all the young people, every time I ask them... I don't really know what goes on in their sessions, if they tell me, that's great. You know, if not, then... But they all come out having really enjoyed themselves. I think it's got a lot to do with being outside, someone doing something, you know, with them. Maybe they don't realise what they're getting out of it, there just getting the enjoyment of being with animals and that is quite a lot, really, for them. 'Cause they don't have people who do things with them for hours. (Extract from interview with referrer)

Errors are not the end of the world; when a task is not accomplished the first (or second or third) time, this is treated as a valuable experience rather than a failure:

Female YP builds and tries her first obstacle course. Some of the obstacles prove tricky for the horse, and do not work out quite as intended. YP and practitioner talk about what went less well in the course: Would you have known that if you hadn't tried? No. (Edited extract from field notes)

The sessions offer room for trial and error, and there is flexibility and openness albeit within the framework of safety. There is an underlying, positive view of the latent possibilities and capabilities of both YP and horse that lead to an encouraging, enabling and allowing atmosphere where YP initiative and agency can be discovered, developed and practiced. The ethos is that as long as it is safe and successful in that it accomplishes the desired results, it is ok. The road to the goal is flexible, go ahead and try! A YP might fetch a horse, putting the headcollar on by just hitching it over one of the horse's ears or around the horse's nose, which may not be the

traditional way but if the horse follows the YP safely to the intended spot -well, then it is successful. This approach may cause difficulties for practitioners with a traditional equestrian training as this often teaches that there are correct and incorrect ways of doing things. Allowing the YP room to try creative or unconventional solutions requires the practitioner to set aside notions of right and wrong approaches and take a step back. “Your role as practitioner is to give them chances to sort things out” (Practitioner). Questions are directed back at the YP in a constructive fashion: “You decide how to do it. Just try!” “So should I do it this way or that?” “Well, what do you think?” “I think I should try both and see which works best -I didn’t know I knew that!”(Extract from field notes).

Other aspects of *Positive Perceptions* relate to the importance of referrers who are willing for the YP to try out what may be regarded as an unconventional service or intervention. In some cases, the referrer is also instrumental in transporting and supporting the YP throughout their participation. The intervention further offers the YP personal development through processes which could lead to increased confidence, self-esteem and self- efficacy, thereby to some extent mitigating previous negative experiences and providing the YP with tools and strategies to handle their life in a new way. When asked if they had learned anything in their sessions, YP answers ranged from concrete tips and strategies to a more general positive outlook:

I have learned that I am good with animals and that will be good with a job like that.

What I can do if I get scared. -drink + a sit down

Nice, friendly at school. Listening about going off the tablet.

(Extract from end of block comments from YP)

### *Communication is Key*

Communication is omnipresent; verbal or vocal as well as non-verbal, and much thought goes into what terminology to use. For example, there is an emphasis on the distinction between *therapy* and *therapeutic*:

P1: I do think that that's.... It's quite important for people to know that... it... It might be therapeutic, but it is not necessarily therapy. Because I think that for some people it has really negative... connotations.

P3: I think people think we are, until we explain.

P1: I've had people turn up and be like “I don't want to do this, ‘cause I don't need therapy”, and... then when you say” it's not actually therapy”, then kind of go “Oh, OK, I'll do it then”. And I think it also gives people unrealistic expectations, I think when you hear therapy you think “I'm going to be cured”, or someone’s gonna fix me”. And actually that might not be what they get out of it. It might be that they get something that feels... that improves something, but it's not gonna make everything better. (Extract from interview with practitioners)

Before, during, and after any activities, words as well as gestures are used to prepare, explain, discuss, interpret, and reflect on events, both by practitioners and YP. What is going to happen? What did happen? Why do you think that happened? What did you do? What can you do? The YP is encouraged to become aware of, and verbalise thoughts, feelings and events: Can you tell me what happened? Can you tell me what made you feel the need to do that? Did you see what she did there? What do you think that means? Is this something that might happen to you elsewhere? Would you act the same in other situations? The YP can talk about, through, over, or to the horse. The horse can function as a transferable object for the YP to verbalise things

that they may not feel comfortable talking about while referring to themselves; and showing feelings to or toward the horse may be perceived as less of a weakness. Telling the horse (verbally or non-verbally) difficult things can be easier than telling a human. There is also room for moments of silence, and though difficulties for both horse and YP are the base of the intervention, there is no dwelling on the past and communication is focused on the present and a look toward the future, for human and equine alike.

We had... somebody come recently... And they came, and the first kind of... session they came, they were really tense. And then... I think it was P that said to... She said "You don't have to talk about anything you don't want to... like, we're here to... to talk about what we're doing now" /.../And she... 'cause she'd been to therapy before and she didn't want to talk about her past anymore, so we... as soon as we said that, you just kind of saw her relax. And, 'cause I mean, our whole motto, providing a hope and a future, we look towards the future, we don't... Obviously we've got to deal with what's in the past /.../ but we don't focus on that, we focus on where they're going next, and I think that... is something really different for the kids. (Extract from interview with practitioner)

Through the structure and routines of the program, the YP are provided with safe and supportive conditions in which to try, fail or succeed and are encouraged to find answers within themselves, to think up and try out different solutions to a problem. Helped by professionals, participating YP can recognise analogies between human-horse interaction and human-human interaction in various everyday social contexts, such as family or school. Learning how to influence and communicate with a large, majestic animal (or a small pony for that matter) is a process which can build confidence, thereby positively influencing the YPs self-esteem and self-efficacy, which in turn can lead to a more constructive learning process for the YP:

...the main thing I have seen is a lot of younger people grow in confidence through out there [sic] sessions.

I have heard young people saying they will use the things at home and school, e.g., problem solving which they learnt by doing it with the horse and then seeing a 'light bulb moment' when they think how this could help them. (Extract from mail interview with trustee/volunteer)

The general interaction with the horse, from grooming to various horsemanship activities, can prompt the YP to become more aware of factors such as their own and others' body language, and learn how they may affect each other. Through adaption of their own body language, the YP can experience how the horse's response changes accordingly:

...and then I thought we'd do some mindful leading, to start off. Because she's done that before. And to get her to think about how being in harmony is working, cause I'm doing the steps at the same time... And watching Missy's breathing. And showing X how she uses her body is, how is it in harmony with Missy's doing the same thing as what she is doing? And how, if she changes, is it changing what Missy's doing? And it gives us something to talk about. (Extract from session planning)

Metaphors and symbols are frequently used, with "child/YP-adapted" vocabulary like using a magic wand to cast spells instead of directing the horse with a whip, that the lead rope should have the shape of a smiley face to prevent it being held too taut, or "Magic Loose Schooling": an exercise where the YP's aim is to get the horse to circle around them in the round pen, without the use of lead rope or lunge line.

I think that's a nice way to do loose schooling with little kids as well, because it's much more... like, they can *get* that, whereas if you talk too much about energy, they don't really understand it. But they do... they all understand magic. (Extract from interview with practitioner)

The concrete, individual, goals set together with the YP can be short or long term and contain everything from “bonding with my beautiful horse” to “going to college”. Each goal gets a visual representation by a pole placed on the ground, and as the YP walks over each one together with the horse, the corresponding goals are expressed in a strong voice. This procedure offers the YP a concrete symbol of abstract goals, illustrating the process of reaching goals through overcoming obstacles. Reaching, or getting closer to, the goals entail the acquisition or development of knowledge, skills and competences, which can be manifested in a smaller/exercise perspective, medium/session perspective, or a larger/intervention perspective.

*Communication is Key* also refers to the YP learning the importance of communication, becoming aware of and trying out different means of communication and experiencing the effect on their surroundings. Relationships with the horses can model relationships with humans: by learning how to form a positive, respectful relationship with the horse, the YP can learn about how to form positive, respectful relationships with humans. The approach needed for the horse to want to interact with the YP can be transferable to other kinds of interaction, forming a model for how to interact in a positive way and even establishing new, healthy, relationships in life outside of the equine setting. By interacting with the horse, and observing the practitioners doing the same, the YP gets to see and experience the importance of communication, that it goes beyond words and what it could look, be, or feel like. Through communication with the horse, the YP gets to experience an action-consequence connection; how even the smallest cues may lead to big responses, and that there are differences in “volume” not only in vocals, but also body language. Trust, boundaries and mutual respect are keys to a successful, positive interaction; something that the YP may learn from the horse, with the aid of the practitioner:

A horse like Missy cannot be bullied into doing things, not manipulated. The YP has to clearly communicate their intentions, with an intensity which suits both situation and involved individuals. Not just learning about the horse or through the horse, but also learning from the horse. (Extract from field notes and reflections)

### *Learning for Life*

Aspects of learning are prevalent in the whole intervention, though especially noticeable in the activities. *Learning for Life* relates to learning which is both for the moment and for the future, and for health as well as education and development. The TH intervention contains both academic learning and experiential learning, where the latter appears to come in two forms: learning by doing and learning by modelling.

Elements of academic learning in the intervention include learning about horses, horse-handling and horsemanship methods, names of brushes or horses’ anatomy, counting or reading etc. After finishing their block of sessions, the YP get a certificate showing that they have completed a horsemanship training course, which for some of the YP can strengthen a developing identity as a “horse-person”, and bring a sense of pride in their accomplishment.

The core of the intervention is in the YP engaging in concrete, hands-on, horse-related activities and tasks. Through the groundwork activities, the YP can learn a wide array of what can be described as Social Skills, or Life Skills; a number of behaviours which are important for the individual to function in a social context. For this study, Social Skills are defined as involving,

among other things, communication, empathy, the ability to recognise others' perspectives and feelings, the importance of taking turns, and initiating and engaging in social contacts. Life Skills are defined as skills and competencies that relate more to the individual YP, such as awareness of boundaries, being able to interact with others in a manner that doesn't encroach on the YP's integrity; identifying, verbalising and communicating one's own needs; or concrete strategies to handle anxiety, stress or depression. The process of acquiring or developing both of these sets of skills requires a raised self-awareness regarding patterns of behaviour, awareness and understanding of how verbal as well as non-verbal communication may affect others, and the importance of phenomena like trust, respect and honesty. The concrete experience leading toward a gradual change in some cases seems to stem from a more or less unconscious absorption and adaption of actions, attitudes, and behaviour during the intervention. An example is an increase in politeness:

P1: ...something that I think that I see, which I know sounds really... silly, is actually... politeness.

M: Oh yeah?

P1: (laughs) They... I think we do, we get a lot of kids in their first session who, I think, are quite used to being... quite rude to adults.

P3: We've had lot of, like teenage boys, particularly, who come over as a bit gruff, and they obviously have some sort of front on.

P1: yeah

P3: ... And then by the end actually, they're as soft as kittens really.

P1: But I noticed in my last block, all the kids in my last block, by the time they finished, were saying: "can you do it please, P2?" You know, "thank you, is it OK with you if I..." You know, and they were the same with the horses as well, they were kind of like... thinking about how the way they did things... affected others? And I think that... yeah, I don't know if it was just that last block or if it's all the kids I see, but I certainly I notice that they, huh, weirdly, start to say things like please and thank you, which is not something that...

P3: I think it's social skills is what they get, really.

P1: It's not that we teach them, it's the way we model it, basically.

P3: Yeah. 'Cause I think we... we're very careful to be... kind of polite and... calm with them, so they kind of do... mirror it back, and they do it back to you. (Extract from interview with practitioners)

The horses and their environment offer experiential learning through hands-on experiences and activities, with information and feedback for visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learners, without the YP having to be aware of their own learning mode preferences, as the introduction of an activity follows the same structure. Every activity is first described and explained, to engage auditory learners: "This is what we are going to do today, this is what it means, this is why we do it and this is how we do it". The activity is then demonstrated by a practitioner, for the benefit of visual learners. Next, the YP gets to try the activity themselves, so that kinaesthetic learners get the experience that works best for them. The YP are encouraged to ask questions throughout and can get assistance in the hands-on practice if they should need or want it. The horsemanship activities are specifically chosen to enable each individual's learning aims, again with a parallel process for YP and horse. The presence of the horse helps make action and consequences clearer and offers illustrations of abstract concepts. The horsemanship activities all entail several experiential learning processes:

*Obstacle course:* provides room for learning and practicing things like proprioception, initiative, flexibility, communication, problem-solving, planning, implementation and reflection. Successful manoeuvring through the course together with the horse and the following evaluation with the practitioner requires communication, taking turns, and an



awareness of how individuals might affect one other. When an obstacle is chosen as a symbol for a difficulty in the YPs life, the YP gets to try out strategies to overcome the obstacle and experience the feeling of overcoming it. These strategies can then be applied to the actual issue or situation that the obstacle symbolises.

*Long reining*: offers learning processes connected to use of voice, awareness and control of body, observation skills, planning, and reflection, as the YP needs to find ways to safely and successfully communicate their intentions to the horse from a different position than when just leading it along, and without the visual feedback of being able to see the horse's face.

*Lungeing*: offers learning of spatial awareness and understanding of how to relate one's own body to a moving object, as well as awareness of posture, body language and use of voice, both regarding volume and tone, and an ability to execute and process several actions at once.

*Loose schooling*: requires the YP to be clear in their communication, using voice, posture and body language, and to learn about congruence and assertiveness without it crossing over into intimidation or confrontation.

*"7 games"*: entail activities like getting the horse to move away from different amounts of hand pressure, backing up or stepping forward on cue, etc. Besides modelling respectful, non-violent communication, the YP can learn about differences in "volume" in voice and body language, getting immediate feedback from the horse.

The learning processes appear to be directable toward different issues or goals. A number of such learning processes are apparent in the activities, the most prominent ones relating to communication, problem-solving, coping strategies and self-care. The insight that communication goes beyond just word can be learned through activities like long reining, lungeing, loose schooling and 7 games. Effective work with horses demands congruence from the YP: where inner emotions are reflected by body language, tone of voice etc. Through the horse's "illustrations", the YP can get insights on their own functioning, and, for example, try out what it feels like and what may result from trying to give off another energy:

...but it's interesting, 'cause I think that she... she was very aware of that and she said, you know, that's what depression feels like for me, it's not having any energy and being tired all the time so I think some... I don't think it will cure her depression, but I think it will... like, she can have an element of kind of... faking it until she makes it. And if she can... see what it feels like to be assertive, she can kind of *try* that, and use it in situations where she doesn't feel, back home... like she's got energy, or she doesn't feel like she's confident. (Extract from session evaluation)

Problem solving is a learning process especially apparent in the activity obstacle course, in a process which can be described as facilitation to finding the answers within. The session structure and activities provided ample opportunities for the YP to discover and develop their problem-solving skills, as they are encouraged to find answers within themselves and learn to trust those answers:

Boy is working with a small pony in the corral. He is copying what the assistant practitioner is doing with another pony, but when he tries to get his pony to walk, the pony does not move.

P1: OK, we have a problem. Let's solve it, what can we do? (Extract from field notes)

P1: but M knew it, she was like "Shall I lead her like this or like that?" and I said: "Well what do you think you should do?" and she was like "I should try both things and see what feels right". (laughs)

M: ... “And the thing is, I wouldn't have *known* the answer if you hadn't asked... If you had asked me, I would have been like “oh I don't know... but I asked you the question, and you asked another question back and I was like” yeah, I know it”, ...

PI: Yeah, that's right

M: ...but I wouldn't have otherwise. (Extract from own session evaluation)

...but it was interesting because I was talking to a referrer about that once and she said “Is it all about you learning to trust the horse or the horse learning to trust you?” And it's more about you learning to trust yourself, I think. (laughs) You know that bit that what I feel is okay and actually what I'm thinking is the right thing. That's the hard bit I think. (laughs) /.../ I think we get that with kids when they go... they'll do something here and ask what is the right thing and I'll say: “well how are you going to find out?” And they're like “Oh I'm going to try this and try that and see what feels best” and then they'll come back and say “I did that at school, I didn't know what to do so I tried these two things...” So they used them, the problem solving skills, in different ways. But it's not really a skill because it's something everybody knows how to *do*, but it's actually *verbalising* that. (Extract from interview with practitioner)

In the process of learning coping strategies and self-care, the horse offers a symbol for the YP, through activities such as grooming and equine knowledge. The process of learning about the horse enables a parallel learning process about the YP: the horse has needs which we try to meet, because if the horse is healthy and feeling well, it can both feel and function better. The horse is worth treating well = I am worth treating well. Taking care of the horse means trying to find out what the horse needs and why = What do I need and why? Breaking things down into small steps for the horses' training = Small steps might work for me too. The YP can learn that it is not only ok but sometimes even vital to be aware of, and considerate to, one's own needs, boundaries, feelings etc. Sessions provide opportunities to learn about the importance of giving oneself the right prerequisites and strategies for performing different tasks. Concrete strategies for mindfulness, stress- and anxiety management can be gained as the YP experiences the importance of getting in the right state before working with the horse and experiencing the difficulties that arise when they are not: “What I want to you to bring with you is that everyone panics. It's not that you panic, it's what you do with it” (Extract from field notes). Strategies gained by the YP can help develop emotional resilience and be applied in situations outside of the sessions. By engaging in new and unfamiliar tasks, the YP is encouraged to verbalise needs, knowing that it's ok not to know all the answers, and it's ok to ask for help, which is an important aspect of self-care.

...“I need help” “Brilliant, what's the problem?” “To make her go back”. “You haven't learned that yet!” They then work through the rest of the course. Afterwards, the practitioner says: “You asked for help. And it was the only part that you had problems with, and that was because you didn't know how to do it. But once somebody told you, once you had that skill, you could do it and did. What I want you to take away from today is that you're very bright, very clever and good problem solver. But sometimes you need to ask for help”. (Extract from field notes)

In summary, the relation between interaction and themes can be described as the *Framework Themes* combining to create a framework for the triad, enabling interaction between YP, practitioner(s) and horse, while the *Content Themes* are located both within and around the triad.

## Discussion

The results showed the triad consisting of YP, horse and practitioner(s) as being the centre of the whole intervention. The triad was where the main part of the interaction took place, it was a prerequisite for development, learning and progress and could also be regarded as an arena where aspects of power and space could be explored. The connection and closeness between the three vertices in the triangle shape fluctuated during each session as well as during the intervention as a whole. Who was given space, who gave space, and who took it (Holland et al., 2010)? This triad appeared to be decisive for the processes in the intervention; however, possible differences depending on which individuals were involved were not investigated in this study. The perspective of the triad bears similarities to research by Carlsson (2017), who studied counsellor-client relationship within Equine Assisted Social Work and the way the addition of a horse changes the dyadic relationship into a triad, concluding that the different liaisons between the triad's actors bring about unique combinations.

Findings pointed out a number of equally important, interrelated key factors, presented through the theme groups *Framework Themes* and *Content Themes*. These themes surrounded and permeated the whole intervention; they were non-exchangeable, each contributing to a vital part of the intervention, and the whole appeared to be bigger than the sum of the themes. As the name suggests, the *Framework Themes* constituted a favourable framework around the triad and thereby surrounded and guided processes during the intervention. This theme group appeared to remain consistent regardless of the individual YP and horse involved. While the *Framework Themes* allowed room for, and improved certain processes, they also limited others. An example was the emphasis on safety for all involved, which entailed limitations on phenomena like initiative and exploration, thus also aspects of YP agency (Matthews, 2007). The results highlighted the importance of the whole concept, from professionalism, attitude and ethos to setup, environment, and activities. All parts interacted and interrelated to make the concept into something more than merely the sum of the aspects or parts, and none of these were exchangeable. This finding reflects previous descriptions of EAI as characterised by their surrounding environment, the client's needs, the competence of the professional, and the horse's specific prerequisites for creating relationship, motivating participation, or as a friend and social competence role model (Håkanson et al., 2021). The importance of specific individuals, human as well as equine, were highlighted in the data together with the importance of the environment. The flipside of this proposed significance was the risk of individuals not being able to continue their work due to illness, relocation, etc. The specific rescue horse ethos meant working with horses who might for various reasons have health issues, which were sometimes progressive. On the other hand, the program was based on blocks of sessions which were normally limited to six weeks, which enabled adjustments of the setup between blocks.

The *Content Themes* highlighted important factors in the intervention, contributing to successful interaction and thereby also learning and development. Phenomena and approaches in the *Content Themes* could vary depending on the participating individuals. A number of the identified key factors tie in with findings from previous studies, such as importance of safe spaces and environment (e.g., Cagle-Holtcamp et al., 2019; Kern-Godal et al., 2016; Hauge et

al., 2014; Håkanson et al., 2021; Höglund, 2020). Physically and emotionally safe places appeared to be a prerequisite for positive interaction and learning, and the equine environment might offer such a safe space, where competencies could be developed while learning about horses, as discussed by Cagle- Holtcamp et al. (2019) and Perkins (2018). During the study, an image emerged of the significance of the rescue horse ethos, as well as *which horse*, as opposed to just *a horse*. This appeared to be important both on a physical and a psychological level; different horses required different handling and approaches from the YP and horses with different looks, personalities, behaviour and backgrounds offered many different aspects for YP to relate to. This entailed a need for high levels of competence and knowledge in practitioners, not only in combining suitable individuals but also in monitoring and guiding the whole process in a safe and successful way. The significance of the way the horse is regarded has been pointed out by Carlsson (2017), findings which are supported by the study at hand. Involving horses could help a young person learn both practical skills and behaviour management, and grasp abstract concepts like boundaries and assertiveness. This makes the horse valued for more than its physical presence, and suggests that similar experiences, results or outcomes could not be reached through interventions utilising or involving inanimate objects. One difficulty with research on animal assisted interventions as a whole is the fact that the subject will always know whether they are interacting with an animal or not, making blind studies impossible (Griffin et al., 2011). The presence of the horse in the intervention also offered the YP a role as caregiver, an important aspect of attachment or bonding, and something which made the intervention different from traditional therapy or learning. The human-horse bonding behaviour has been noted as important in EAI, with an emphasis of such bonds being positive, reliable and reciprocal, to generate a secure human-horse attachment and achieve improvements in the participants (Arrazola & Merkies, 2020).

The ethos of inclusion, worth, and potential noticed in the TH intervention extended to both horses and YP. Valuing, protecting and making room for individuals who “do not fit in”, or who might be excluded from society, in a sense, sent a powerful statement towards the YP. The process of the YP learning to observe and respect their own boundaries, and to sometimes put themselves first, appeared to be enabled through parallels with the rescue horse rehabilitation and training. This was emphasized by the practitioners’ reminders that the YP always could choose not to have the researcher present, thus underlining the central position, or importance, of the individual YP’s wellbeing.

### Understanding the findings through the Biophilia Hypothesis

The Biophilia Hypothesis (Wilson, 1984) proposes that humans have a natural affinity for living things, which might explain the importance ascribed in the findings, not only to the presence of horses, but also the surrounding environmental aspects of the intervention. The calming rural environment was pointed out as an important factor in making the intervention perceived as novel and enjoyable. The way this could provide a positive space in which to establish therapeutic relationships ties in with previous findings (e.g., Maujean et al., 2013). Horses have been described as having a calming effect in themselves, through their visual appearance as well as a combination of grooming and stroking which releases oxytocin (e.g., Uvnäs Moberg, 2009), and they bring with them a need for conscious presence and grounding to facilitate

successful interaction. The Biophilia Hypothesis' thought that humans have an innate affinity with nature and "everything living" connects to findings in the study at hand as well as previous research, regarding the significance of equine presence as well as the equine environment or milieu. An environment that is perceived as safe and non-judgemental, which provides a closeness to nature, and which is different from school environment appeared to be a vital part of the concept, essential for positive and successful outcomes and experience as noted previously (e.g., Byström, 2020; Carlsson et al., 2015; Carlsson, 2018; Höglund, 2020; Pendry & Roeter, 2013). Höglund (2020) proposes three key elements for nature-based interventions: social context, farm environment and farm based activities. EAI is characterised by its surrounding environment, and the health-promoting effects that are brought on by spending time outdoors and close to nature are always added to the specific effect that the horse's presence entails (Håkanson et al., 2021).

One of the unique features of EAI is that the participants generally need to come to the equine setting, or context, and the environment is a factor which is inextricably linked to the horse, the physical environment as well as the psychological. The horse as such can never be separated from its environment or milieu, which will always be different from a traditional or conventional setting for therapy or learning. Therefore, deciding to what extent the environment and the horse respectively contribute to the phenomena and processes identified in this study is not possible, though the Biophilia Hypothesis provides a viable explanation of the perceived impact of the concept.

### Understanding the findings through Experiential Learning Theory

Throughout the study aspects of learning were prominent, and based on the experiential, hands-on nature of the intervention, Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) (Kolb, 1984) was chosen as a perspective from which to understand and explain learning processes in the intervention. When the concept of learning by doing is brought to the equine environment, the horse can be said to function as the teacher and the practitioner as the facilitator, who "translates" by encouraging reflection and awareness to enable the YP to learn by trial and error while proceeding through the Learning Cycle. Knowledge is the result of a combination of grasping experience and transforming it (e.g., Kolb, 2015; Stock & Kolb, 2016), and the Learning Cycle could in fact be identified in many aspects of the intervention. The basic session structure contained stages parallel with those of the Learning Cycle, where the YP through interaction and cooperation with the horse acquired awareness, competences, and skills which could be tested in the Therapeutic Horsemanship context and eventually be transferred to their everyday life. Parallels could also be drawn between Social Skills and Life Skills and Kolb's description of knowledge as the transaction between social knowledge and personal knowledge (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2013). Parallels between session work and the Learning Cycle could be seen throughout the intervention, here illustrated by a YP attempt to catch a horse:

*Concrete experience (CE):* the hands-on personal experience that the YP learned from. A new experience or situation was encountered, like the example of trying hands-on to catch a horse for the first time. Unfamiliar tasks could prompt the YP to step out of their comfort zone and could make reflection and subsequent learning easier.

*Reflective observation (RO)*: the YP considered what went well and what could be improved. This reflection could be either expressed verbally or done quietly, and the practitioner supported the process by asking questions that encouraged reflection. Reflections were based on the outcomes of the attempt, and the horse's situation, behaviour, and responses, but were directed toward the YP. What happened? Why? How?

*Abstract Conceptualization (AC)*: once the YP had identified and understood the defining characteristics of the experience, focus could be directed toward change. Did anything need to change? Reflections might also be directed at the YPs behaviour and experiences in other parts of their life. Did the YP tend to blame others? Keep their distance? Be very loud, either in voice or body language? Drive others away? Brainstorming and planning could lead to new ideas on how to approach the situation, e.g., the horse appeared to run away from me when I used big gestures and a loud voice, maybe I should try again with a quieter voice and softer posture.

*Active Experimentation (AE)*: this phase was where the YP got to try out the abstract ideas and strategies to see what worked. Active trying, and retrying, could bring the YP around the Learning Cycle. The concrete changes that the YP made to their approach in catching the horse could then be transferred to other situations. If catching the horse was easier with the YP being less confrontational, maybe this was an approach that the YP could apply in school or at home?

According to ELT, effective learning only occurs when a learner proceeds through all four stages of the cycle, though the learner does not have to begin at a certain stage. If the YP only tried to catch the horse without reflecting on the outcomes, or only came up with different strategies to catch the horse without trying them, it would likely not lead to any lasting changes in the YP's life and behaviour. The practitioners' attitude and approach appeared crucial for the learning cycle to be initiated, something which manifested itself in factors like practitioner facilitation competence and specific skills required to decide specific YP-horse combinations. Open-ended questions guided and aided the learning process. An individual focus was key; sometimes, taking a break from the cycle was a result in itself as the YP learned to recognise, verbalise and meet their own needs.

Sessions followed a basic structure but were adapted to accommodate each YPs personality, difficulties and goals. Thus, the *Framework Themes* and *Content Themes* combined to offer the YP prerequisites to reach a receptive stage, enabling a successful learning process. The Framework, with safety, routine, transparency, and the Content and session structure, with its focus on communication and interaction, appeared to provide a safe and positive space in which the YP could explore, learn, practice and develop phenomena like agency, initiative, competences and skills. The aspect of learning was apparent in the whole intervention, and findings portrayed learning to be omnipresent, taking different shapes, and with a possibility to be directed at specific learning goals, from mindfulness to Life Skills. The horse's role was highlighted throughout the entire data set, but there was no concluding whether similar processes could be gained by including other types of animals. The rescue horse ethos appeared to have a big impact in the learning process, by offering a focus point for the YP as well as a learning process in which the YP got to care for, teach or train the horse, learning about the horse and learning from and through the horse. This process appeared to be more or less conscious depending on YP, situation and circumstances.

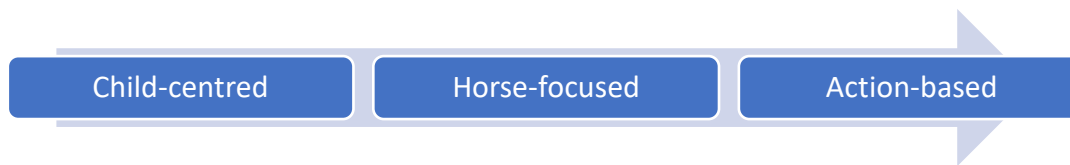
Just as certain factors could enhance the prerequisites for learning processes, there were factors which could counteract them. Based on the identified key factors for progress and positive experiences in the intervention, factors that might counteract learning include a “wrong state of mind” for the YP, e.g. stress, anxiety or active drug abuse (in which case the YP would not be allowed to participate in the intervention) which may prevent the YP from getting in a receptive mode; unsuitable human-horse combinations; lack of supportive network (for access as well as participation and implementation in general life), level or means of communication not suited for the individual or involuntary participation. Stress and fear are factors which also reduce or prevent learning in horses (Goodwin et al, 2009), which would in turn be counter-productive for the YP’s learning process. This could also be seen as a parallel process for human and horse, where safety and state of mind could be described as needing to be calibrated in order for learning to take place. Prerequisites for such calibration could be found in both the *Framework Themes* and the *Content Themes*. Various equine assisted interventions for human health, learning and wellbeing rely on human-horse interaction to achieve therapeutic effects, and lack of social skills in participants might potentially lead to unsuccessful human-horse interaction. This is where the practitioners’ facilitation skills were pivotal, as learning how to interact with the horses was a prerequisite for the intervention as such to be successful, and eventually leading to the YP developing their interaction with others. Unrealistic or unfounded expectations of what the intervention entailed could hinder both access to the intervention and a positive process. This might be mitigated to some extent by clear communication and conscious use of terminology, so that YP and network knew more about what to expect.

Connections between the Biophilia Hypothesis and Experiential Learning Theory were noted, for example in the description of learning transactions as taking place between the individual and the environment (Kolb & Kolb, 2011). Biophilia could be described as humans’ general connection to all living things (Byström, 2020), and the process of experiential learning was aided by the interaction in the triad, which was surrounded and permeated by the equine environment. ELT as proposed by Kolb takes a holistic approach and emphasizes how experiences, including cognition, environmental factors, and emotions influence the learning process (Granberg, 2004). Being in nature, as in the studied intervention, could have a restorative effect on learning, and a slower pace allowed the participant time to take things in (Stock & Kolb, 2016).

The collated picture of the interaction and learning, as well as the intervention as a whole, is that it can be summarised as child-centred, horse-focused, and action-based as illustrated in Figure 5. The intervention was based on individually adapted practical tasks, adjusted to each individual YPs circumstances, needs, difficulties and goals. Goals and activities might vary for each individual, but these aspects appeared to be constant. The YP learned and developed together with the horse through specific horse-related activities. The reason for the YPs’ referral, their past, was not emphasized, instead focus was on the present and toward the future for both YP and horse.

**Figure 5**

*Visual Summary of Intervention, Interaction and Learning*



The *child-centred* aspect was enabled by the session ratio one YP- two practitioners. Results pointed at the importance of practitioner competence, professionalism, and safety for a successful intervention. Practitioners appeared to have adopted the same approach and ethos, with a focus and flexibility directed at each individual YP though within clearly identified and stated frames or boundaries. There appeared to be a strong conviction of child agency and competence which permeated the program, and in a sense, could be described as one of the motivations for the whole intervention. The element of person-centeredness and the way it allows practitioners to adapt both themselves and the environment to individual YP has been brought forward by Sansom (2018) as heightening the likelihood of positive outcomes for YP whoever they are. To be able to learn, the learner needs to be in a receptive state of mind, and many of the participating YP experienced difficulties concentrating in traditional learning environments, such as large classrooms with other pupils. The groundwork activities offered room for trial and error, in a physically and mentally safe space, and a quiet, encouraging environment centred around the YP and their individual needs.

...most of these kids can't concentrate in school, you know, in a big classroom, it's /.../ so they all...the coming here and having the one to one, it's so... it is so important for them /.../ Both of them have said that, you know... she has that thing, she has the attention, doesn't she? They come here, and they can concentrate." (Extract from interview with referrer)

The *horse-focused* aspect of the intervention enabled a parallel learning process for the YP, which simplified could be described as the YP learning about themselves by learning about horses and horsemanship. The horse has been described as a bridge to other benefits (Sansom, 2018), or to a genuine environment, one that is not specifically constructed for human benefit but for the horse (Silfverberg, 2020). Within the horse focus, the rescue horse ethos emerged as an essential aspect which appeared to be significant for both interaction and learning processes, as the rescue horse offered the YP a focal point outside of their own sphere, beyond what might be achieved by a "non-rescue" horse. The way staff regarded the horses as sentient beings, valued despite sometimes traumatic pasts or unstable health, or perceived limited usefulness, seemed significant. This supports previous findings by Carlsson (2017), who noted that the way the horse is regarded by professionals or practitioners influences outcomes of an intervention. An emotionally significant, two way relationship with the horse has been described as equally valuable as other significant relationships are to personal transformation (Sansom, 2018). One apparent question that arises is whether a different ethos would entail a different outcome? How important was the identified practitioner congruence toward both YP and horse for the reported positive experiences?



The whole intervention was *action-based*. Through hands-on experiences, the YP could find increased wellbeing in the moment, as well as work toward short- and long- term goals set up for themselves and the horse. The action could also relate to the YP as an additional facilitator of their own experience, active in their own process, as discussed by Sansom (2018). Findings indicated that the totality of the intervention, made up by the key factors, and centred around individually adapted activities, enabled the intervention to be perceived as both novel and enjoyable. The attraction and novelty of EAI activities being of importance has been indicated by previous studies (e.g., Pendry & Roeter, 2013; Kendall & Maujean, 2015; Maujean et al., 2013; Sansom, 2018). This perception might motivate participation from YP tired of, sceptical toward, or who don't fit in with, various other kinds of education, interventions or therapy.

The fact that findings from this study on some accounts correspond with findings from previous studies on related topics, suggests that the chosen approach was viable in terms of validity. A need for research on central factors in EAI has been proposed previously (e.g., Carlsson, 2016; Håkanson et al., 2021; Pendry & Roeter, 2013), and by identifying and presenting an overview of key themes in a groundwork intervention, the study at hand could contribute to an increased understanding and base for further research on the underlying processes which enable outcomes proposed by previous research. EAI has been argued to have significant effects on social competence and behaviour in children, as well as aiding the development of interpersonal skills, temper control, emotional regulation and an understanding of others (Hemingway et al., 2015; Pendry et al., 2014; Perkins, 2018), and studies have shown young people to be able to translate confidence, behaviour and skills learned and developed in sessions into their everyday lives (e.g., Maujean et al., 2013; Pendry & Roeter, 2013; Perkins, 2018). Similar skills or capabilities were noted both in interviews and observations also in the study at hand despite the fact that outcomes were not focus for the study, as outcomes and processes might be difficult to separate. Could these processes and potential or subsequent results be achieved in another way than the triad child-practitioner(s)-horse? The object for this study was what happens when humans and equines meet in a specific setting, other aspects were therefore not investigated.

A number of further limitations of this study should be recognised, such as the research being conducted by a researcher with limited experience, within a limited time frame and with limited resources. Due to these only a partial account was possible, and omissions had to be made, wherefore the findings should be regarded as indicating at an overall picture while not claiming to present an absolute description. Even though the intervention was child-centred, the framework surrounding it was inevitably an adult one which could be argued to put the adult (world) in a power position vis à vis the child (Halldén, 2003; Matthews, 2007), and limit the child's perspective. This was to some extent reflected in the study through the deliberate decision to involve adult individuals connected with the intervention, in an attempt to capture different perspectives, which unavoidably entailed adults talking about children or on behalf of them. Initially, more extensive child participation was hoped for, but as welfare and wellbeing of the YP was the main priority, the inkling that the interview situation might be regarded as uninteresting, intrusive or uncomfortable lead to a change of plans and a different ratio in YP/adult subjects and less of a child's perspective in the interviews. The results of the study were thus based mainly on professionals' and observer's descriptions, albeit with a child focus.

It is unclear whether a child's perspective could be studied or captured with the chosen methods or under the circumstances of the study at hand.

According to Peterson and Kolb (2017), the way that the individual remembers experiences differs from the active process of experiencing, as the mind creates illusions that influence how experiences are remembered. Humans often tend to ascribe more weight or importance to recent experiences, thus an event that ends well may be remembered as positive even if the experience as a whole contained negative, painful, or unpleasant aspects. This reasoning would argue for the benefits of therapeutic groundwork as a means of improving quality of life for disadvantaged YP, on a specific session level as well as a general intervention level and subsequently in the YPs everyday life. Through this process, experiential learning could provide individuals with the tools they need to take charge of their lives (Peterson & Kolb, 2017), which ties in with one of the stated aims for the studied intervention: to provide the YP with tools to help themselves. This supports findings by Sansom (2018), who concluded that the aim is for the YP to live life better. The results therefore suggest that Therapeutic Horsemanship, or therapeutic groundwork, can be a suitable model for offering Experiential Learning experiences to disadvantaged YP and others in need of similar support.

## Methodology

The choice of research paradigm was guided by the purpose of the study: to explore central components or factors, and to explore aspects and characteristics of interaction in the intervention. Adopting a qualitative research paradigm allowed for rich descriptions, insider perspective and close interaction with the social agents in the field. Rich descriptions offered a way to increase validity, providing readers with information on context, setting and procedures which might enable comparison to other interventions. Progressing from specific observations toward more sweeping generalisations and theories, findings may suggest a truth but do not ensure it. In ethnographic research the researcher is both an instrument and a limitation, and as the study at hand was conducted by a single researcher, this specific researcher's interpretations of events have influenced both processes and results. Due to its ethnographic nature, the study would not be replicable in exact measures as even the exact same setup repeated at another time might produce slightly different outcomes. Each combination of YP- practitioner- horse- issue- activity- specific conditions was unique for that specific point in time.

A risk with this kind of overt ethnographic approach was that agents might behave differently as they were aware of being studied. This effect may have been somewhat mitigated by time factors: the longer the researcher is present in the field, the better the likelihood of reducing overt changes in behaviour of the subjects, and for the researcher to gain insider status and insights. The study could be extended from the originally planned four weeks to five, but as the block of sessions had a set number of weeks, extending the study with the same sample would not have been possible. The fact that the study coincided with a specific block of sessions meant that there was researcher presence throughout all or most of the intervention, and as the situation as such was new to most YP, the presence of a researcher might have been perceived as one of many unfamiliar phenomena. This is, however, an assumption which has not been tested.

*Triangulation* was used as a strategy to increase validity and credibility, and to access different perspectives. Observations were a means of capturing what individuals actually did, rather than what they said or thought that they did. Observations only, though, convey more about outer processes, and less about the individual experience. Interviews were therefore a means of getting access also to internal aspects of individual experiences. By starting out with observations and engaging in interviews later, and by progressing from passive toward active observations, the study could be described as progressing from an etic standpoint toward an emic standpoint (Streubert & Carpenter, 2010). Observations and interviews built the core of the data, augmented by informal talks, participation in everyday activities and reviewing of documents regarding organisation and YP to get a more detailed picture of the project and intervention. By including both YP and adults, and by combining observations and interviews, a more detailed image of the intervention could be obtained. Combining different methods and types of data within the qualitative approach proved to be a good strategy to confirm findings made through one method, through findings of another, and to gain a variety of perspectives.

*Observations* are suitable when exploring interactions, as they provide opportunities for detailed descriptions of both the setting and its actors and activities, leading to a better understanding of the context (Tjora, 2018). One important consideration concerns the extent of participation while observing (Fangen, 2005), and the plan to gradually proceed from passive to active observations seemed a suitable strategy as the YP appeared to get used to researcher presence and participation, thus minimising their awareness and focus on being in a research situation. However, this is a subjective observation as YP perceptions of the research situation was not measured or otherwise investigated. An advantage of active participation was the closeness to the participants, which allowed for noticing things that might be missed or overlooked from a distance and for questions to be asked in situ as opposed to written down or kept in memory until a suitable time would present itself. It can be questioned how much of an insider's perspective that could be gained, not only due to time limitations, but the choice of strategy. There will always be dimensions that the researcher cannot perceive, and documentation is inevitably built on the researcher's interpretations. There is a risk of the participants, perhaps especially the YP, manipulating what is shown, and with limited research experience, how could I as a researcher be sure of not being biased and only seeing what was expected? One factor that worked to counteract this turned out to be my equestrian experience, not only as expected because it allowed me to notice phenomena, but also unexpectedly as it made me unconsciously expect certain outcomes and events aligned with traditional equestrianism, making it very obvious when something entirely different took place. The practitioners also made researcher presence a part of the general setup, by occasionally making casual remarks which could remind the YP without portraying the situation as "complicated research": "Now try walking him in a straight line toward Mia over in that shed, then turn to the left and walk around the cones". "Be careful with Mia, she's come a long way and we can't afford to get a new one!" (Practitioners).

*Interviews* took place toward the end of the field study, to give the respondents time to get used to the ongoing study, and to make the situation as natural and comfortable as possible. The decision to include other categories than YP drew on a study by Burgon (2003), who reflected that the team as a whole is important to the success of an intervention and therefore needs to be

included; a reflection which is supported by the findings in this study. With no two interviews containing the exact same questions, comparison was not possible, and was also not the intention. The aim was to capture many different perspectives on the same topic to form a fuller picture, rather than identifying one truth, and semi-structured interviews were a viable way of adapting the interviews to suit the subject while still maintaining a red thread in the discussions.

*Reflexivity* turned out to be a central factor throughout the study; an important tool in keeping the balance between trying to become a part of the studied culture to the extent that there was a risk of going native and losing sight of the study's purpose, and on the other hand trying to maintain researcher objectivity to such an extent that the risk of missing the ethnographic insider perspective was apparent. The researcher needs to be aware that by simply being present in the culture, it is changed (Streubert & Carpenter, 2010). Bergström and Boréus (2005) argue that we never meet a text empty handed, that there is always some preconception and risk of bias. It is important to recognise "the adult mediation and construction of children's 'voices'" (Komulainen 2007, p 16). The data in this study was collected, processed, and presented by one researcher, with specific background, experiences and preconception, as well as knowledge, lack of knowledge, and limited research experience. Some of the strategies for maintaining as high a quality as possible despite these prerequisites were to reflect on, and maintain, an awareness of how personal preconceptions may affect the research process. In this sense, reflexivity can be seen as a strategy to ensure ethical research conduct, as by becoming aware of my own thoughts, ideas etc, I could set them aside and minimise the risk of them affecting the research process.

Getting access to the field is of course a prerequisite to conduct any study at all, and by no means something to take for granted (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). There are always gate keepers, and a prerequisite for the study was that I encountered gatekeepers who could, and wanted to, open doors to the organisation and introduce me and the study in a trustworthy way. Good will and trust, toward the researcher as well as the research situation, are important resources which can improve the prospects of acquiring valid information, as subjects who have a positive view are more likely to engage in the research process, providing full and accurate data which is a prerequisite for valid information (Denscombe, 2010). Gate keepers were of importance not only to enable access to the field, but also throughout the field study's different phases to enable access to specific events, activities, or individuals, and this entailed a risk of gratitude toward gatekeepers and participants affecting perspectives and processes. To address this risk, reflexivity was applied as a mitigating strategy. The field study had to be conducted within a limited time frame, and there were no resources for the organisation to introduce an outside person to their structure and way of working, or to the equine work as such. My previous "human-horse experience" was one factor that contributed to getting access. As I did have experience from working with both vulnerable individuals and horses, it would be possible for me to contribute if needed rather than tying up resources and obstructing the daily work.

The participants were chosen by convenience sampling, as they were all stakeholders connected to the specific block of sessions that coincided with the timeframe for the study. A small sample size and specific setting limits the possibility of comparison and to some extent also replication, and the heterogenous character of the sample group also limits possible conclusions related to

more specific issues or diagnoses. Other participants might have resulted in different outcomes, regarding results of the study itself as well as access to sessions and subjects willing to engage in the research situation. As no comparison with the same setup but different participants was made, this was not possible to establish. It cannot be assumed that another group of YP would have acted and reacted the same way toward the research situation as such, something which was noted by practitioners:

P2: I think you've been very lucky with this lot to get... everybody so comfortable with... somebody else there as well.

M: they seem to have completely forgotten, I mean, unless... you or P1 or P3 said" Oh, watch it so she doesn't run Mia over!" "Oh yeah, she's there, I forgot that". But it's not been a big thing.

P2: No, they have just carried on... as normal, and... I think it's been really nice, *because* you've kind of been there from the start. (Extract from interview with practitioner)

### Ethical considerations

When conducting research with young and vulnerable individuals, safety and ethics are key elements. The researcher cannot be the expert who decides whether their research is ethical or not (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). For student research on this level, formal ethical approval may not be required but when conducting research that involves respondents who are both young and vulnerable, the researcher still is an outsider and an adult studying children or young people, and needs to tread very carefully. Having the consent form produced and presented by the organisation was a strategy intended to minimise the risk of either YP or parent/guardian feeling obliged to give consent, or not feel comfortable enough to ask questions. Niemi (2013) discusses ethical dilemmas surrounding research regarding individuals with intellectual disabilities, among other things whether the subject is aware that the researcher is a researcher. Throughout the study, staff have reminded YP of the reason for researcher presence and repeated the YPs right to ask questions or to withdraw, either from being observed during a certain activity, during a session, or from the whole study: "If you don't want anyone watching today, just say so and we'll tell her to leave!" (Practitioner). The choice should always be the YP's, and according to experienced staff, this was a successful strategy to make the YP feel comfortable in the research situation:

They know who you are and they've got a sense of "this lady isn't intimidating; she's not judging me. She's just here to find out how it works and if it works for us", really. And it's quite special for them in that sense as well, cause they kind of think "Oh this... There's somebody actually taking an interest in why... I'm here" /.../ I think it's worked really well because they've had that *choice*... /.../ before... you came. It was up to them. They knew that there was this lady coming and that you might be filming, or talking, or asking questions. And... They had that choice, if they wanted to do that. And it was really nice that a lot of them... wanted to./.../ And it... That's quite surprising, 'cause a lot of them have got very complex backgrounds, and things that they don't want publicising... And for them to be really open about it, it's a nice... way of seeing, that they're actually in some kind of recovery? Because that's part of the recovery process as well, letting other people in. (Extract from interview with practitioner)

Though names of subjects or exact time for the study are not disclosed, complete anonymization of the location was not possible as it was the only organisation of its kind in the country at the time, and as the environment descriptions hint at the location. The choice to include descriptions of the environment was made on grounds of the environment proving to be a significant factor in the processes, while this inclusion was deemed as posing a low threat to YP anonymity.

All adult participants had consented to having quotes from interviews included in the report, despite the possibility of them being recognised. Throughout the study, data where participants might be recognised was, physically or digitally, locked up when not handled by the researcher. Ethical considerations regarding the horses and their welfare had not been discussed extensively beforehand, though the flexibility regarding chosen methods etc. included the possibility of cancelling the study if equine -or human- welfare would have appeared to be compromised.

### Validity and Reliability

The use of concepts of validity and reliability as they relate to qualitative research has been debated (Golafshani, 2003; Streubert & Carpenter, 2010), as they can be argued to relate more to quantitative research and therefore not be directly transferable to qualitative research. As the concepts nevertheless can be claimed to be established also within the realm of qualitative research, aspects of quality in the study will be discussed based on these concepts. In research with a qualitative approach, the researcher can be argued to work continuously with the concepts throughout the study, and should be aware of factors like trustworthiness, quality and rigor and how these can be conveyed to a potential reader as the researcher alone cannot evaluate the quality of the research. For the study at hand, validity can be argued to have been improved by the choice of research strategy and approach, which transpired to provide findings relevant to the purpose of the study. Further strategies applied to increase validity and reliability were transparency of choice and process, together with a brief statement of my own background and understanding of the field, and the use of rich description to enable others to make comparisons and form own opinions of the quality of the study. Findings should be perceived as accurate from the standpoint of researcher, participant, and potential reader. Accuracy of description is key, whether that relates to events, objects or behaviour, and a threat to accuracy was me as a researcher failing to note or interpret occurrences correctly, or regarding the past “through the lens of the present” in the analysis process.

In qualitative research, instruments for data collection consist not only of technical equipment but also humans. By combining a variety of data collection methods and involving a variety of stakeholders, the risk of “instrument malfunction” could be minimised. A threat to validity and reliability is that of inferred meanings and interpretation. As the study at hand was conducted in an English-speaking setting while English is only my second language, this posed a possible threat to a correct representation of participants and events; as terms, intentions etc. might be misunderstood. One mitigating factor in this context was my familiarity with equine vocabulary in both languages, as well as with the equine setting and work with vulnerable young individuals who might struggle with communication. Findings have been verified with participants, so called respondent validation, resulting in a confirmation which strengthens assumed accuracy of description and suggests validity and reliability to the research. To ensure accuracy of inferred meanings, findings are illustrated by participants’ own words and concepts, with wordings and spelling unedited. Other strategies for increasing validity and reliability were the use of method triangulation; combining not only research methods but also different sources of information; to use rich descriptions; and to keep detailed field notes. Triangulation was also a means of controlling bias, though a drawback to this approach was the generation of a large body of data to process with limited resources, experience and time. The core to conducting a

good quality study lies in its credibility, i.e. confidence in how well data and analysis processes meet the intended focus (Streubert & Carpenter, 2010). By working with triangulation, respondent validation, and by being present during a whole block of sessions, increased credibility could be established.

### Generalisability and Transferability

The fact that parts of the results correspond with previous research would suggest some transferability, though due to the characteristics of the study a general transferability cannot be assumed. The study was conducted within a specific program, in a specific setting, with a sample limited to individuals participating in the program during a specific time period, thus data was based on a relatively small number of participants and with the intent to explore a specific context. Even with the same YP, practitioner, horse and activities, factors such as weather, mood etc. make each session unique. Rich descriptions and transparency may to some extent aid readers in evaluating the findings' transferability to other settings and might also increase generalisability together with a reviewing of the sample against the study's purpose to ensure that the sample is representative of the studied context. For a study to be regarded as generalisable though, research findings should be applicable to a larger population or to a similar situation. As the sample in this study is a convenience sample, and the general purpose of the study was to increase understanding of key factors and interaction in the specific setting and context, overall generalisability of the findings is not assumed.

### Implications for future research

According to Danermark (2001), one of the distinctive characteristics of an interdisciplinary field is that it is problem-oriented rather than having a set base in a specific scientific field, and that it relates to combinations of knowledge with bases in several disciplines. It is described a research model where scientists co-operate around a mutual problem, study it from their respective point of knowledge and then integrate the results, creating a holistic outlook on the issue. The wide variety of approaches, programs, aims, theoretical foundations and not least target groups within the field of EAI suggests that such an interdisciplinary research approach could benefit multiple scientific fields and disciplines. The cross-scientific field of Child and Youth Studies appears to connect well with the general field of Human Animal Interaction, which involves researchers from a wide variety of disciplines (e.g., Lerner & Silfverberg, 2020), and further research on EAI for children and youth could thus contribute to increased knowledge for several subjects, such as psychology, behavioural and social sciences, biology, and pedagogy. This could provide useful insights related to the field of work and practice as well as research on EAI. The presented results provide only glimpses of the complex nature of EAI and TH for children and young people, and numerous other aspects remain to investigate. Future research could build on the findings of this study to test its reliability by confirming or rejecting findings, based on a similar design in another setting or context, or by emphasizing a child's perspective. Examples of unresearched aspects in the study at hand are YP agency, identity, the distribution of power within the triad child-practitioner (s)-horse, and transferability of acquired competencies or skills into other parts of the YPs life. Increased knowledge of the nature of possible transferability could determine whether, and to what extent, this is possible and if so, how it can be optimised.



The results of the study point to a combination of the whole concept and involved individuals (human and equine) as being vital for the intervention. Further research could aim to elucidate the significance of a specific human or equine individual for safe and successful interventions and positive experiences for the participant, for example from a perspective of combining specific equine characteristics with specific YP issues, difficulties, or diagnoses. Given the indication of significance of the rescue horse ethos, as well as the significance of particular equine individuals, aspects such as attachment and trust are further possible research angles. The prevalence of symbols and metaphors could not be extensively explored in the study, and further exploration of these aspects could contribute to a deeper understanding both of the prevalence, role and significance of such phenomena in various EAI settings for children and youth. The results of the study at hand further suggests Experiential Learning Theory as a useful theoretical framework also within the field of Child and Youth Studies.

### Practical Implications

This study has implications for those interested in functions or nature of alternative and complementary programs or interventions for children and youth, as well as EAI in general, as it offers insights into both fields. It further describes prerequisites and processes for safe and successful development and implementation of EAI as a positive experience for children and young people. The findings of the study also indicate that Experiential Learning Theory could be a useful framework when working practice-near with learning processes in the field. Findings of the study may be of importance or use for different disciplines relating to children or youth in need of support, who may be perceived as disadvantaged or at-risk, or for various reasons not benefitting from more traditional education or therapy settings.

As previously pointed out (e.g., Burgon (2011): horses do not suit everyone. Some YP may have health conditions that render TH unsuitable. Some may just not like horses. Even when it might be deemed a viable option for a YP, the often considerable cost can be an obstacle limiting the provision and availability of EAI. Results of the study suggest that making such interventions available for children and young people considered at risk or disadvantaged may be cost-effective in the long run, as they appear to offer directable experiential learning experiences in a novel and motivating context. Interventions like the one explored in this study enable participants to learn and develop skills, competence and strategies to cope with future difficulties. Thus, there appears to be a possibility of limiting or decreasing risks of further disadvantage, or for the participant to become/remain labelled NEET, Not in Education, Employment or Training. Increased knowledge about processes and central factors could be useful for those who consider offering similar services, as well as those considering referring a YP to a similar service. Findings indicate the importance of engaged referrers, willing to try an intervention/service which might be considered unconventional and supporting the YP throughout the intervention. Increased knowledge means increased awareness of important factors in an intervention, thus enhancing the chances of making informed decisions and finding a safe and successful intervention that will suit the individual YP.



## Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to explore key factors and aspects of interaction in a Therapeutic Horsemanship program for disadvantaged Young People. Previous research appears to mainly have investigated outcomes of various interventions and the findings of the study at hand could therefore add to improved understanding of key factors or elements in EAI by offering reflections from what appears to be a hitherto unexplored angle. The research was of an exploratory nature, with an inductive ethnographic approach, using qualitative research methods in a field study where data was collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews and analysed by Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

The findings of the study point out a number of equally important, interrelated key factors, presented through *Framework Themes*, consisting of *Concept*, *Environment* and *Activity*; and *Content Themes*, consisting of *Safe Spaces*, *Positive Perceptions*, *Helping Horses*, *Communication is Key* and *Learning for Life*. These themes surround and permeate the whole intervention. They are non-exchangeable, each contributing to a vital part of, and prerequisites for, the intervention. The whole can be argued to be bigger than the sum of the themes, and at the centre of the themes, and thus also the whole intervention, is a triad consisting of YP, horse and practitioner(s). The triad is where the main part of the interaction takes place, and it is a prerequisite for development and learning processes to occur.

The results show a presence of both academic and experiential learning in the intervention, and that parallels can be drawn between the stages of Kolb's (1984) Learning Cycle and the structure of the TH activities. The setting and structure offer the YP prerequisites to reach a receptive stage, enabling a successful learning process. The framework, with safety, routine, transparency, and the session structure with its focus on communication and interaction, provide a safe and positive space in which the YP can explore, develop, and practice their agency, competences and skills. The aim of the intervention is to provide the YP with tools to help themselves, whether it be improved wellbeing in the moment or coping strategies for the future.

The intervention as a whole, thus also interaction and learning within the intervention, can be summarised as child-centred, horse-focused, and action-based as illustrated in Figure 5. The intervention is based on individually adapted practical tasks, focused on rehabilitation of rescue horses but adjusted to each individual YPs circumstances, needs, difficulties and goals. The YP learns and develops together with the horse through specific horse-related activities. The reason for the YP's referral, their past, is not emphasized, instead focus is on the present and toward the future for both YP and horse.

The TH intervention's rescue horse core creates a twofold learning situation, where the YP help to rehabilitate the horses, learning about horsemanship and acquiring equine knowledge; and through this also learning about themselves, and the learning processes in the intervention appear to be to some extent directable, thus adaptable to address a variety of issues or goals. This would argue for the approach being suitable for a heterogenous group of participants, and for children and youth who for various reasons have a need for an alternative environment and

experience. By enabling wellbeing in the present, better prerequisites for learning and development can be offered.

Based on the results of the study it could be proposed that Therapeutic Horsemanship or similar Equine Assisted Interventions may be a suitable option not only for “therapy-tired” or “school-tired” YP, but for children and young people struggling with a wide variety of issues. This is based on the findings that it appears to offer increased wellbeing as well as academic and experiential learning experiences, which in turn appear to be directable at learning or acquiring a number of Social Skills or Life Skills which seem transferable outside of the equine context. Findings also propose that professionalism, expertise, and safety are essential factors for safe and successful interventions.

As both Child and Youth Studies and Equine Assisted Interventions are wide, cross-disciplinary fields, aspects of this study can have relevance to a variety of areas, from psychology and medicine to pedagogy and ethology, and to researchers as well as practitioners in both fields. By presenting an exploration of key factors of EAI, this study could inspire and support future research. It could further add to knowledge and provide guidelines for good practice, thus improving quality and hopefully also access to EAI for children and youth.

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## Appendix A. An introduction to the field of Equine Assisted Interventions

### Human-Animal Interaction

Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) is a broad term which refers to any relationship or interaction between a human and a non-human animal. It encompasses the mutual, dynamic exchanges between humans and other animals, and the psychophysiological effects of such exchanges. This study focuses on the part of the concept that consists of interaction and intervention involving equines, and to set this in a wider context, this chapter presents a brief overview of the field, moving from animals in a wider sense to a focus on equines.

### Human-Animal Bond

Humans and animals have had a close bond in various ways throughout history (Hallberg, 2008); humans have depended on animals for survival, transport, safety and company, and the history and development of humans are closely intertwined with that of animals. According to the Biophilia Hypothesis, humans have an innate affinity for nature and animals, and spending time and interacting with animals and nature can fill a basic human need, while humans deprived of contact with nature may suffer physically (e.g., Kellert, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c; Wilson 1984). Animals have been described as “natural therapists”, able to contribute to human health and wellbeing in numerous ways (e.g. Hallberg, 2008; Håkanson et al., 2021; Silfverberg & Lerner, 2020; Silfverberg & Tillberg, 2011), and the involvement of animals in areas such as health, learning, social care and rehabilitation is increasing (Maujean et al., 2015). The field of human-animal studies is a wide and cross disciplinary one (Silfverberg & Lerner, 2020), and research tells of interventions with all sorts of animals, from non-specified pets to specific species like rats, hamsters, dogs, birds, dolphins and even ants (e.g. Geist, 2011; Grandgeorge et al., 2009; Jalongo et al., 2004; Parish-Plass, 2008; Silva et al., 2011; Somervill et al., 2009; Topel & Lachmann, 2008). These animals are incorporated in interventions for purposes such as human learning, wellbeing, therapy, personal development, communication, physical or psychological training or rehabilitation. The presence of animals in therapeutic interventions for children and youth is proposed to have advantages such as providing a calming and less threatening atmosphere, and making the therapist seem less threatening and more trustworthy through the relationship between therapist and animal, for example in the eyes of a child who might for various reasons distrust adults (Parish-Plass, 2008). The notion that animals may have a positive effect on human health in general, as well as the development of children, is by no means new or revolutionary: in the 1600s, philosopher John Locke recommended the keeping of pets for children as a means of developing their responsibility and compassion, and in the 1800s, Florence Nightingale brought forward the involvement of animals for providing health benefits and lifting human spirits (Sansom, 2018; White-Lewis, 2020). The first deliberate involvement of animals in clinical psychology has been credited by many to Boris Levinson, who included his dog Jingles in child therapy sessions, finding that this caused positive reactions in the children (e.g., Bachi et al., 2012; Burgon et al., 2018; Chardonnens, 2009; Friesen, 2010; Geist, 2011; Grandgeorge et al., 2009; Hines, 2003; Jalongo et al., 2004; Lerner & Silfverberg, 2020; Levinson, 1962, 1984; Parish-Plass, 2008).

## Human-Equine Bond

In many cultures, equines have been essential for human survival (Silfverberg & Tillberg, 2011), and they have had a pivotal role in shaping both human history and the modern world. Without the horse, things would have looked significantly different for human development (Burgon, 2011; Silfverberg, 2014). Equines have been recorded as healing agents throughout history, viewed as therapeutic and beneficial for humans already by the early Greeks (Burgon, 2011; Hallberg, 2017; Lerner, 2020; Silfverberg, 2020). Nowadays, equines are part of thousands of health-promoting therapeutic, social, and pedagogical contexts in over 50 countries around the world (Hallberg, 2017; Silfverberg, 2020). There has been a gradual shift, from a focus on the horse as a tool for physical rehabilitation and training, to a realisation and appreciation of what horses can teach humans about themselves as social and ethical subjects (Silfverberg & Lerner, 2020). The field of practice is currently unregulated, though there are several organisations and networks offering frameworks and ethical guidelines for professional standards (Burgon et al., 2018), such as PATH International (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International, founded in 1969), EAGALA (Equine Assisted Growth And Learning Association, founded in 1999), HETI Federation (The Federation of Horses in Education and Therapy International, founded in 1974), IAHAIO (International Association Of Human Animal Interaction Organisations, founded in 1992), and in Sweden OHI (Organisationen för Hästunderstödda Insatser, founded in 1994).

## Terminology issues

Within the growing and developing field of equine assisted interventions for purposes such as therapy and learning, there is a lack of uniformity and an over-abundance of inconsistently used terms which can cause confusion (Hallberg, 2008, 2017; IAHAIO, 2014, 2018; Lentini & Knox, 2015; Lerner & Silfverberg, 2020; Wood et al., 2020). A multitude of terms refer to a multitude of approaches, in which guided interactions between humans and equines facilitate positive effects on human function and well-being; from physical or psychological therapy to facilitation of awareness of personal skills (Arrazola & Merckies, 2020). A strong relationship can be found between the evolution of professional identities, the professional dynamics, and that of the relation to animals (Michalon, 2020). This is reflected in a parallel evaluation and evolution of terminology, gradually moving from terms implying use, to terms of collaboration; and from the horse as a tool to the horse as a sentient being. Terms used to describe different programs involving equines have varied and evolved, depending on the focus of the programs; from Hippotherapy, Equine Therapy/ Equine Assisted Therapy (EAT) and Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EAP) to Equine-Assisted Counselling, Equine-Facilitated Learning (EFL) or Equine Assisted Services (EAS), just to mention a few (e.g., Saggars & Strachan, 2016; Wood et al., 2020).

## Equine Assisted Therapy/Psychotherapy vs Equine Assisted Activities/Learning

The term Equine Assisted Therapy (EAT) is normally used to refer to strategies employed by qualified mental health practitioners working within their specific theoretical orientation (Bachi et al., 2012; Hallberg, 2017; Wood et al., 2020), while the term Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) generally refers to nontherapy methods focusing on outcomes such as developing specific social or educational skills, or social, emotional, and behavioural development (Wood et al., 2020). Equine Assisted Learning may be provided by professionals like teachers or social

workers (Burgon et al., 2018) and can be described as a unique set of practices which combine experiential learning and interaction with equines with counselling-based processing skills to benefit children in areas such as awareness, emotion control, cognition and behaviour. The horse's natural behaviour is utilised to interact with humans in a manner that enhances safety, wellbeing and development of both human and horse (Pendry et al., 2014).

### Why Horses?

Equine assisted interventions such as therapies and learning incorporate the combined remedial benefits (e.g., cognitive, physical, emotional) of animal-assisted interventions, focusing specifically on the horse (Brady et al., 2011). While many of the benefits that horses may bring into a therapeutic encounter are similar to those of other animals, horses are also said to possess additional qualities due to their size and strength as well as vulnerability and specific characteristics (Burgon, 2011; Hallberg, 2008; Kendall & Maujean, 2015). Human-horse interaction is different from, for example, human-dog interaction (Brandt, 2004), as horses are prey animals whose survival has depended on the ability to flee at high speed from the threat of a predator, as well as the ability to live in a co-operative group, or herd. With their behaviour governed by fight or flight instincts, and being distinctly social beings, horses pay great attention to detail and may respond to things that humans do not notice (Lentini & Knox, 2009). They possess well-developed non-verbal communication skills and are finely tuned to reading and responding to body language (Brandt, 2004). Horses also have highly sensitive bodies, which they rely on to transmit and receive information, and they are very responsive to the behaviour of others, be it horse or human. This enables them to give immediate, honest and accurate feedback, providing immediate response to human behaviour and actions and enabling facilitation of therapeutic processes (Burgon et al., 2018; Hauge et al., 2015; Lentini & Knox 2009; Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010) and giving humans insights about their actions and how they may be interpreted by others (Stock & Kolb, 2016). Horses are increasingly viewed as an integral aspect of the intervention and more of a “co-therapist” or “co-teacher” than a mere tool in the team (Saggers & Strachan, 2016). Many practices focus on assisting and aiding humans in building and improving interpersonal skills by practicing those skills together with horses (Kieson, 2018). Equines may have a calming effect on humans, while at the same time requiring total attention to the moment. A horse's size, power, and straightforward nature in interactions may further contribute to therapeutic benefits by providing opportunities to explore elements of control, power, and vulnerability (Lentini & Knox, 2009). The horses' size also brings an element of danger into the interaction, making the establishment of an effective communication system crucial (Brandt, 2004). To communicate and work effectively with horses it is necessary to model behaviours that the horse will respond positively to, communicating qualities such as calm, confidence and fair leadership. This provides opportunities and a means of learning new, more positive, forms of behaviour (Burgon, 2011).

Involving horses into a program enables a behavioural and experiential approach to teaching cognitive skills, such as strategizing to accomplish goals, and abstract concepts such as teamwork and boundaries (Saggers & Strachan, 2016). Riding and spending time with horses can also help a person activate their brain, reclaim old skills, and initiate learning processes required to gain new knowledge and skills (Silfverberg & Tillberg, 2008). Like humans, horses

have their own distinct personalities, shaped by their individual background and life experience (Hausberger et al., 2004). This enables projections, metaphors, and mirroring; providing opportunities for participants to learn more about themselves. Participants might identify with the horse's need for security and safety, thereby making the horse a metaphor for their own feelings (Karol, 2007). To successfully complete tasks, different horses require different approaches from participants. Through this experience, participants learn to observe and respond to the behaviours of the horse instead of remaining in their current behavioural patterns (Saggers & Strachan, 2016; Trotter, 2012). The horse can also provide a secure base; an environment in which mindfulness exercises, as well as metaphor, analogy, and the use of play and projection can be introduced (Burgon et al., 2018). The horse may be perceived as non-judgmental: it shows no interest in clients' history or diagnosis but can be seen as someone who will listen to a participant/client and give them an (often unaccustomed) feeling of being loved, respected, trusted, and cared for. Participants/clients have been reported to describe a happiness brought by contact with the horse, which might not be experienced in social interaction with humans (Carlsson, 2018).

## Appendix B. Overview of acquired data

Table 1. Overview of acquired data

Type of data	Quantity	Comments
Observations	Total 29	
TH Sessions	24	6 filmed 5 film + photos 4 sketched 1 sketched+notes 23 notes
Saturday Club	3	Photos + notes
Starfish Sessions	2	notes
Interviews	Total 13	
Practitioners	3	2 individual interviews 2 group discussions (2+3 subjects) Recorded + notes, complements via e-mail
Referrers	2	Recorded + notes
Young Person	5	1 live (notes) 4 at last session via staff (results e-mailed)
Volunteer	1	Notes
Parents/Guardians	1	Interview + subsequent e-mail
Trustee	1	Part of group discussion + subsequent e-mail
Documents		
Information about WITH and TH Referrals Sessions plans Session evaluations Individual YP's ratings, goals, plans etc.		
Miscellaneous		
Staff meeting	1	Notes
Session evaluation	5	1 recorded 4 notes
Session planning	3	1 recorded 2 notes
Informal talks/discussions (all categories)	~35	Some notes + later reflections
Own mock session	1	Partly filmed + evaluation & reflections
Photos + film of venue and surroundings Articles + web site information about TH and WITH		



## Appendix C. Consent Form



### Therapeutic Horsemanship Research Project

#### Consent Form

A student from Sweden, Mia Harri, is coming to WITH in [time period removed for confidentiality] to conduct a research study to contribute to increased knowledge, development and progress in the field of therapeutic horsemanship and equine-assisted activities in general. Her main focus will be on interaction and non-verbal communication between participants, horses and staff members. For her research, she would like to conduct observations of sessions with field notes and visual/audio documentation, combined with interviews with participants as well as support persons (e.g. parents, residential home staff etc.) and staff from WITH. You can choose whether or not you would like to take part in the research project. If you change your mind during your course of sessions, you are free stop participating at any time. Please indicate your choice using the form below.

- I do not wish to be involved in the research project described above.
- I would like to take part in the research project described above in the following ways: (mark all that apply):
  - My sessions may be observed by researchers.
  - My sessions may be photographed/videoed by researchers.
  - I am happy to talk to researchers about my sessions.
  - I am happy for WITH staff to discuss my sessions with researchers.
- I understand that all information about me and my sessions will be completely anonymous.

Participant's name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian signature \_\_\_\_\_

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