

The Unique Characteristics of the Horses for Humans Learning Purposes in Equine Assisted Learning Practice

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to encourage scientific discussion about one of the aspects of equine-assisted learning practice, the unique characteristics of the horse owing to how it is used in intervention programmes for human learning purposes. Equine-assisted learning is an innovative learning approach where human learning and development takes place through guided interactions between humans and horses. Although scientific interest towards human-horse interactions is becoming increasingly popular, evidence-based research has examined the relationship between humans and horses, and how such bonds may contribute to human learning and development is limited and lacks empirical support. This report provides a review of theoretical and empirical literature regarding the unique characteristics of the horse to find answers to the following - why are horses involved in intervention programmes for human learning purposes. As the result of the research, five main characteristics of the horse were put forward for critical discussion.

KEYWORDS

Archetype Of The Horse, Equine Assisted Learning, Horse Behaviour, Human-Horse Relationship

INTRODUCTION

Equine Assisted Learning is an innovative learning practice wherein humans through guided human and horse interaction are engaged in activities that offers them an individual and unique learning experience. The notion *Equine Assisted Learning* in literature is relatively new. This innovative learning practice can be applied for a variety of intervention goals. Equine assisted learning is not a therapy. Currently, there are a lot of intervention programmes across the world for various human learning needs. Equine Assisted Learning programmes are being designed and offered to diverse groups of people with varying learning needs. For example there are programmes for youth and women at risk, programmes for developing self-confidence and self-esteem, leadership development programmes, women's workshops, entrepreneur training programmes, programmes for preventing behavioural disorders (ADHD, FAS, ODD, OCD, etc.), workplace skills development and corporate team building programmes, programmes for marital skill development, sales skills development programmes and many other programmes (Frederick, Ivey Hatz & Lanning, 2015; Equine Connection, n.d.). Horses participate in different correctional programmes for adults, children and the youth. Horses are also involved in various corporate development programmes and in school settings for school-aged children helping them achieve their learning needs as an integrative part in psycho pedagogical, social pedagogical and special education practice as well as in occupational therapy education (Murphy, Wilson & Greenberg, 2017; EAGALA, n.d.; EAHAE, n.d.; HETI, n.d.; HHRF, n.d.). Equine Assisted

DOI: 10.4018/IJSEUS.2019070104

Learning programmes are very widely used and have broad multidisciplinary content and these have been developed under various theoretical and practical frameworks (Gehtmane-Hofmane & Nimante, 2014). The positive outcomes that can be obtained from guided human and horse learning activities are primarily illustrated in marketing materials. Explanations regarding the reasons for the involvement of horses in intervention programmes for learning purposes are based on empirical work and are not theoretically founded in research data. Authors describe their own experience as participants in programmes and consider the consequences and benefits of human–horse interactions as a tool for self-development and improvement (Kelly, 2013; Murphy, Wilson & Greenberg, 2017).

The term *Equine Assisted Interventions* is used as an umbrella term for all subfields of equine assisted interventions such as equine assisted therapy, equine assisted psychotherapy and equine assisted learning. Equine assisted learning is the most recent subfield of Equine Assisted Interventions and is designed for physically and emotionally healthy individuals. The keyword to consider in all equine assisted learning programmes is learning. Equine assisted learning as an educational approach offers an alternative way of thinking about human learning.

BACKGROUND

Equine assisted learning and all its models and programmes are based on empirical practice. With the development of this approach for human learning, more and more theoretical explanations are being formulated. However, there is no theory comprehensive enough to explain the impacts of Equine Assisted Learning on human learning and development. Equine assisted learning as a part of the field named Equine Assisted Intervention is developing alongside animal assisted therapy. Equine assisted interventions involves horses whereas animal assisted therapy involves pets like dogs and cats. Horses are prey animals, while dogs and cats are predators and as such have developed very different skills and behaviours compared to horses. Significant differences exist between them – different historical development and the unique characteristics of the horses owing to which it is used in intervention programmes for human learning purposes. Research done in the field of Animal Assisted Therapy cannot be applied to Equine Assisted Learning and Equine Assisted Interventions in general, because they have different intervention goals, benefits and outcomes that cannot be compared with Animal Assisted Therapy. (Gehtmane-Hofmane & Nimane, 2015). Equine Assisted Learning should therefore be developed providing more comprehensive theoretical explanations. Taking into consideration the abovementioned the following question can be put forward: why are horses involved in intervention programmes for human learning purposes?

The involvement of horses in purposeful interventions has a long history. Its origins can be found at the beginning of this century. In 1999, the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) – an international non-profit association for professionals using Equine Assisted Therapy to address human development needs was set up (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association, n.d.). Since 2008 EAGALA has provided education, standards, innovation and support to professionals offering services in Equine Assisted Learning around the world (Zimmerman, 2010; EAGALA n.d.). In 2004 The European Association for Horse Assisted Education (EAHAE) was founded and is focused on establishing and developing Equine Assisted Education as a general form of personal and professional development (European Association for Horse Assisted Education, n.d.). In Latvia the discussion on equine-assisted learning was started in 2014 with the establishment of the Animal-Assisted Therapy association of Latvia and development of an Equine Assisted Learning programme for adults suffering from social anxiety disorders (Gehtmane-Hofmane, Nīmanīte, 2014). Equine Assisted Learning is a practice in which humans through guided human and horse interaction are engaged in activities which allows them to acquire an individual and unique learning experience. Not only the unique characteristics of the horse but also its symbolic value as an underlying pattern in human thinking must be taken into account to understand the reasons for involvement of horses in intervention programmes for learning purposes.

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