

Horses supporting the social inclusion of young people with disabilities: A case study from Ireland

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) are recognised practices useful to enhance the social inclusion of people through interaction with nature and animals. Despite their perceived benefit, much of the preceding literature focuses on the limited evidence base for the impact of AAIs, due to a limited number of studies conducted with randomised control trials. The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of young people with disabilities engaging in an equestrian training programme in Ireland, showcasing AAIs as a means of social inclusion.

METHODS: This article reports on one component from a PhD on nature-based interventions and the social inclusion of young people in precarious situations. The research was a qualitative, exploratory study involving participant observations of eight young people engaging in the programme, and one semi-structured interview with a programme participant. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify key themes.

FINDINGS: An analysis of the data identified four main themes: the importance of the human-animal bond; the natural environment aiding learning; the calming effect of horses on the students; and, centring animal welfare in the programme.

CONCLUSION: This article advocates that social work and relevant disciplines can consider AAIs as innovative and beneficial for some young people engaged in their services, such as for the social inclusion of young people with disabilities. Additionally, this article suggests that, when centring animal welfare guidelines in these programmes, AAIs can also serve to protect the health and wellbeing of the non-human animal involved.

Keywords: Equine-assisted services, animal-assisted interventions, social inclusion, disability, vocational training programmes, animal welfare

Introduction

The aim of this article is to present findings from a single case study taken from a broader, multi-case PhD project exploring nature-based interventions (NBIs) in Ireland supporting the social inclusion of young people in precarious situations. This case study explores the experiences of young

people with disabilities engaging in an equestrian training programme (ETP) in Ireland, showcasing animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) as a way towards social inclusion. This training programme takes the form of a nature-based vocational education and training (VET) initiative which is utilised to support the social inclusion of marginalised groups, including people with disabilities.

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The research questions of the overall study are:

- How, if at all, do NBIs enhance the social inclusion and capabilities of young people in precarious situations?
- How does the nature element of NBIs contribute to enhancing young people's freedom to lead a life they have reason to value?
- What do the programmes do that gives the young people a reason to value them (or not)?

The data collection took place on site at Festina Lente, a registered charity who offer equine-assisted services (EAS), such as therapeutic horse riding, day service programmes and a mobile equine outreach programme, for people with additional needs, including physical, mental, developmental or intellectual disabilities, in County Wicklow, Ireland. The research participants were students in the Festina Lente's ETP, which is a 3-year, full-time VET programme and EAS for young people with disabilities. This programme supports the students to develop their knowledge, skills and competence in a broad range of equine skills, and successful graduates qualify to work in a variety of equine sectors through a formal Quality and Qualifications Ireland Level 4 Major Award in Horsemanship.

Initially, as a background to this study, the topics of social exclusion, VETs and NBIs, are explored. Then the research methodology and methods are discussed, and the context of the case study explained further. The research findings are presented as four major themes: human–animal bond; natural environment aiding learning; calming effect of horses; and centring animal welfare. These findings are discussed in relation to preceding theoretical work and empirical studies, and to the research aim and questions. The human-centred approach of this research aims to understand the experiences of the people taking part in the

programmes as a result of their interactions with nature and more-than-humans; however, impacts on the non-human animal are also discussed. This article adds to the ongoing discourse on the ecosocial approach in social work, and specifically offers an alternative way for social workers to work in an interdisciplinary mode, with the help of the natural environment through NBIs, to support the social inclusion of young people with disabilities.

Background

Social exclusion experienced by people with disabilities

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) defines people with disabilities as “those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (p. 4). People with disabilities are at a higher risk of social exclusion, and within the European Union, the “widest absolute gap between the shares for people with and without a disability was in Ireland (39.3% for people with a disability compared with 14.6% for people with no disability)” (Eurostat, 2022). The Government of Ireland (1996) defined social exclusion as “cumulative marginalisation: from production (unemployment), from consumption (income poverty), from social networks (community, family and neighbours), from decision making and from an adequate quality of life” (p. 17). There is, therefore, the need for appropriate, long-lasting solutions to enhance the social inclusion of people with disabilities to support them to participate effectively and meaningfully in society.

Alternative education opportunities

VET initiatives can be considered as one option to support inclusion possibilities of participants by enhancing skill development

and personal development. The purpose of VET programmes is to provide education designed to aid individuals in securing employment and promote opportunities for people with a disability (Bartram & Cavanagh, 2019). This provision of education focuses on the specific knowledge and skills required to work within a particular occupation. The ETP at Festina Lente originated from this goal, to provide education for people with additional needs to achieve employment within the equestrian industry. Learning is intended to equip the participants with the theory and practical ability to acquire work upon completion of the course.

To support the securement of employment and success of the learner, this course emphasises a holistic view of education. Miller (2000) described holistic education as a “philosophy of education based on the premise that each person finds identity, meaning, and purpose in life through connections to the community, to the natural world, and to humanitarian values such as compassion and peace”. The implementation of holistic learning is demonstrated in Festina Lente’s mission statement outlining the goal to “empower people to achieve their personal best in the natural world of horses, horticulture and community” (Festina Lente, 2024). The ETP demonstrates the implementation of this concept by tailoring classes to the learners’ style and pace whilst incorporating a rounded education. This means that learning is not solely based on academic knowledge but encourages the development of confidence, independence and other life skills which are key attributes to support the gaining of employment in the future. This further enhances the social inclusion possibilities of the programme participants.

Working with(in) nature

Social workers are increasingly incorporating the natural environment into our practice, education and research, and some are embracing an ecosocial approach (EA) in

social work, which is a vital way to transform how we approach all social issues, structures and problems from a combined social and ecological lens (Matthies et al., 2001). The EA provides a holistic approach to social issues and recognises the interconnectedness between humans and the non-human natural world of plants, non-human animals, ecosystems, etc. (Matthies et al., 2001). This approach centres the natural environment in our promotion of wellbeing. The EA is maintained throughout the research process as an alternative approach to social change and mainstream social work which has been useful in combatting social exclusion (Turunen et al., 2001). This approach utilises different theoretical approaches which uphold social and environmental justice (Matthies et al., 2001). One example of ecosocial work in action which this article addresses is NBIs, and, more specifically, AAIs. These interventions are considered useful to enhance the social inclusion of people through interactions with nature and animals.

The VET programme offered at Festina Lente is a form of NBI that can offer a promising initiative to support the social inclusion of marginalised groups, including people with disabilities. As Shanahan et al. (2019) succinctly defined, NBIs are “programmes, activities or strategies that aim to engage people in nature-based experiences with the specific goal of achieving improved health and wellbeing” (p. 2). NBI is an umbrella term encompassing various transdisciplinary interventions, including AAIs. As defined by the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations (IAHAIO) (2018), AAIs are “a goal oriented and structured intervention that intentionally includes or incorporates animals in health, education and human services (e.g., social work) for the purpose of therapeutic gains in humans” (p. 5). Some examples of AAIs include visiting dog walking programmes, animals in the classroom, equine therapy, social farming, and animal-assisted pedagogy.

Within AAIs is a sub-field of horse and other equine related interventions, hereinafter referred to as equine-assisted services or EAS, which covers various services in which professionals incorporate horses and other equines as collaborators to benefit people; this consists of three broad areas: therapy; learning; and horsemanship (Wood et al., 2021). Within Ireland and internationally, the implementation and recognition of AAIs and EAS have become increasingly popular deriving from the need for these services and following the recognition of their potential benefits (Seery & Wells, 2024). Some of the popular types of EAS within Ireland include therapeutic horse riding, equine-assisted learning, and equine-facilitated psychotherapy.

The many potential benefits of NBIs, including AAIs and EAS, have been evidenced throughout research, such as improvements in physical, mental, social, emotional or spiritual health and wellbeing (Carlin et al., 2020; Shanahan et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2023); increasing self-esteem and enhancing social inclusion (Rogerson et al., 2019); and improving nature-connectedness (Sheffield & Lumber, 2019). Human–animal relationships can support our physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing by altering the chemicals in our bodies and brains (Kruger & Serpell, 2010). These benefits come from the sense of attachment to another being or attachment figure, allowing the human–animal bond to enhance social relatedness and belonging (Fine & Beck, 2019; Hauge et al., 2014). The benefits can also extend to the animals engaged in the service when their welfare and well-being are prioritised. The services provided by Festina Lente incorporate the five domains model by Mellor (2017), which assesses the nutrition; physical environment; health; behavioural interactions; and, overall mental state, of equines, therefore ensuring both their welfare and wellbeing. This theoretical model is designed to assess the welfare of the animal in a “systematic, structured, comprehensive and coherent” structure

(Mellor, 2017, p. 6). This model of assessment takes a step further than welfare to wellbeing and creates an environment for improving the quality of life of the animal as opposed to simply meeting their basic needs.

The research which has been completed within Ireland has supported the growth of the EAS industry, outlining some of these services can offer effective, transferable and long-lasting benefits to participants (Heffernan, 2017). Despite these possible benefits, the evidence base for AAIs is limited due to a lack of well-designed studies using randomised controlled trials (Fine, 2011). The authors recommend more research on the topic, specifically exploring the effectiveness of AAIs for the social inclusion of young people with disabilities. For this reason, this research explores the experiences of young people with disabilities engaging in an equestrian training programme in Ireland, showcasing animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) as a means of social inclusion.

Research methodology and methods

This research took a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perspectives of young people engaging in an NBI, and to explore how these programmes are carried out. This case study includes one semi-structured, individual interview with an ETP participant, and participant observations of eight young people engaging in the ETP, which took place over a one-week period in 2023, from May 8–12.

The research participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure richness of data from participants who have specific experience of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2014). The researcher contacted Festina Lente directly by email to discuss the research project. Once the organisation had offered to take part in the research, a suitable group of participants (students from the ETP) were chosen based

on the research project's inclusion criteria, the type of activity, the time of year the programme operates, and the duration of the activity. The researcher had no prior relationship with the organisation chosen and there were no conflicts of interest identified. The criteria for participation were that the participants must be young people who self-identify as being in a precarious situation; and who are participating in the selected nature-based programme in Ireland. The key feature of precarity experienced by the research participants was that they have a disability and thus face social exclusion.

Prior to conducting the research, an information sheet written in everyday language was shared with potential participants, including a consent form and information on the processing of personal data (privacy policy). To make the research and recruitment process more accessible, the researcher also created a 4-minute video of themselves describing the research project in everyday language which was shared with Festina Lente and the ETP students. No additional support needs were identified as the potential participants conveyed their understanding of the research requirements. This recruitment process resulted in eight ETP students providing written consent to partake in the research project. The age range of the participants was between 17 and 24.

Observations

The observations were carried out by the researcher whose role was that of observer as participant, meaning the role of the researcher was known to all involved, and the researcher engaged in the activities alongside the participants being observed. The researcher became fully engaged in experiencing what the participants were experiencing, taking in-depth field notes on the environment, the people, hierarchical structures, language used, words spoken, activities experienced, and the researcher's responses, thoughts and feelings. The setting is like many horse-riding schools, with an

indoor arena, large outdoor fields, horse stables, tack rooms and an office. On site is also a large walled garden and garden shop, and temporary structures (e.g., prefabs) which act as offices and classrooms for the ETP students. The week on site was varied, and some tasks under observation involved the researcher and students grooming and handling horses, taking part in theory lessons such as communications training and practical lessons such as horse-riding, having lunch together, and working on the yard such as mucking out stables and cleaning.

Interview

At the wish of one ETP participant, an in-person, semi-structured interview was conducted on-site at an outdoor location chosen by the interviewee. Open-ended, semi-structured questions were asked to allow the participant freedom to discuss topics that were meaningful to them in response to the questions. Although pre-determined questions were formulated in an interview schedule in keeping with the semi-structured approach, probes were used to allow the participants to expand on their own experiences (Marlow, 2011). Topics discussed in the interview included social inclusion, their subjective experience of the NBI, power relations, skill building, future goals and impact of the NBI on their life. The interview was audio recorded using a dictaphone and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service in Ireland.

Analysis

Verbatim transcriptions of the field notes and interview data were input into MAXQDA, a software program for qualitative and mixed method analysis. Data were elicited and themes identified using a deductive approach, meaning the research questions and theoretical background guided the data collection and analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Marlow, 2011); however, the themes that developed were sometimes more broadly related to the research questions,

due to allowing the perspectives of both the researcher and the research participants to influence the process. Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis approach was used to develop, analyse and interpret patterns across the data. The six phases of data analysis were: dataset familiarisation; data coding; initial theme generation; theme development and review; theme refining, defining and naming; and, writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This was not a linear process, with the researcher going back and forth between different stages as needed.

Situating ourselves

The authors are people without disabilities who have no experience engaging in an NBI or VET as participants. We acknowledge that the research participants are experts by experience and we sought to uphold their views and voices as accurately as possible. At the time of this study, the researcher and first author was completing a PhD and employed at Bielefeld University, Germany as a doctoral researcher. Prior to conducting this research, they reflected on their own biases, their role as a researcher, power dynamics and the impact their presence would have on the group. The researcher worked in social work practice for a couple of years prior to becoming a researcher and takes an empowerment approach to working alongside people, and also spent many years horse-riding and working at stables, therefore felt comfortable handling and working with horses.

At the time of this study, the second author was completing a master's degree in Social Care Management and was employed full-time by Festina Lente as yard manager, therefore, working closely daily with the students in the ETP programme. The potential bias arising from the second author working at the intervention being studied was minimised as they did not play a role in the research process, meaning they did not collect, analyse or interpret the data. The second author was invited by the researcher to co-author this article, after the findings

of the data analysis had been interpreted, due to their practice-based knowledge of the programme and also their experience with animal welfare. Both authors practised reflexivity throughout the research and writing process to reflect on the impact of their own worldviews, biases, positioning and values on their understanding and interpretation of the findings.

Ethics

Data collection commenced following ethical approval, granted by the Ethics Committee of Bielefeld University. To minimise harm to the participants who were not experienced in participating with research, the researcher upheld rights-based and social justice theories of ethics throughout the research process. These theories of ethics centre the principles of treating people with dignity and respect, avoiding harm, and amplifying the voices of the least advantaged groups to redress inequality (Rawls, 1971; Simons, 2006).

Findings and discussion

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of young people with disabilities engaging in an ETP in Ireland, showcasing AAs as a means of social inclusion. Thematic analysis of the data identified four major themes: the human–animal bond; the natural environment aiding learning; the calming effect of horses; and centring animal welfare. Pseudonyms have replaced the names of the research participants to uphold privacy and confidentiality.

Human–animal bond

A close bond between the students and horses was observed and discussed by the students. This bond can support human wellbeing, social relatedness and a sense of belonging. This is especially important for the young people with disabilities to increase their social inclusion by having the opportunity to engage in meaningful relationships which can be both modelled by, and experienced with, horses.

Some students reported a connection to animals before their engagement in the programme, like Cassidy who shared, "I have 32 horses and two dogs at home." For others, this connection was fostered during their time in the programme. When observing the students working on the yard:

[I]t was clear that each student had their favourite horse. Some students were keen to introduce me to their favourite horse and I encouraged them to tell me about the characteristics of the horse. David seemed to speak about the horse like a best friend, and he was often physically close and touching the horse throughout his interactions. (Field notes)

The students often affectionately spoke of the horses, such as Cassidy saying, "I love riding. Riding Fred. He's my baby."

Forming a connection to the animals was encouraged by the staff, for example:

[W]hen getting horses from the fields to bring back to the yard, the students were asked by the staff which they wanted to take or who their favourite was. The students always had a horse in mind that they wanted to connect with that day. Josh said he always asks to take Jelly [a horse]. (Field notes)

Also, at the beginning of a group horse-riding lesson, the teacher "encouraged the students to talk to the horses and use their voice. He empowered the students to connect with their horses one-on-one and to build a relationship with them" (Field notes).

These findings support evidence of the human-animal bond and attachment theory. In the context of mental health support, Serpell et al. (2017) situated the animal as a co-therapist that offers an additional relational model. Latella and Abrams (2019) explained this more specifically in the EAS setting, describing horses as capable of perceiving, responding to and

learning from their environment, which aids their therapeutic skills and educational abilities. This is important for the research participants as they engage in the ETP to gain skills and enhance their employability in the future. Physical connection with an animal can activate the oxytocin system and reduce cortisol levels (Handlin et al., 2011), and enhance feelings of intimacy and perceived social support, which was also observed in this study (Beetz, 2017; Hauge et al., 2014). These health and wellbeing benefits that derive from a physical and emotional connection to the horse can support the students to lead a life they have reason to value by considering the horse as an attachment figure and a relational and social model to aid their social inclusion.

Natural environment aiding learning

In this programme, the students often work and learn outside in nature. The Victorian walled gardens act as a beautiful outdoor classroom, useful for attention restoration. The large fields are also a natural setting for the students to learn about horse behaviour and wellbeing, and the skills required to work in the industry in the future. As these students may experience barriers to learning in more traditional environments, like school, due to their disabilities, the benefits of the natural environment here are very important for capability building, skill development and social inclusion.

Throughout the ETP, the students attend a variety of lessons, including some theory lessons held both in an indoor classroom, and outside on the yard. The students shared that they "prefer being on the yard all day than days with indoor lessons" (Field notes). On the second day of observations:

[T]he afternoon class was out on the yard. Students appeared to respond much better learning outdoors than this morning's indoor class. Students appeared more focused. There were more physical outlets and students had

the ability to move around to expend their energy. This physical release was encouraged by the teacher. (Field notes)

On the third day of observations, the afternoon class was:

[T]aken by the teacher out in the garden. The surroundings were very peaceful, with lots of grass, flowers, trees and the sound of trickling water from a nearby pond. There were other people with disabilities working in the gardens or enjoying them. The students were asked by the teacher if they prefer learning indoors or outdoors. The students said it depends on the weather but usually outdoors, even in the rain if they can go under a shelter. There were lots of small breaks during this lesson for one student with ADHD so he could go for short walks and release his energy without disrupting the group. Zach said he needed this to get rid of his energy. (Field notes)

The natural setting allows the students more freedom and flexibility to engage in a holistic education that is tailored to the students' style and pace, while incorporating a connection to the natural world.

This theme broadly supports the findings of other studies in this area linking the natural environment with enhanced learning outcomes. Burgon (2013) emphasised that the natural environment is a therapeutic process of equine-assisted learning, which is a major theme identified in their research. Nature as a background to activities and as a place for learning is presented by Wals (1994) as a fun and friendly environment where students can explore and learn more freely. Additionally, cognitive functioning can increase through immersion in nature (Atchley et al., 2012) which was evident when reviewing these field notes recorded on the same day: "the students are barely engaging with the teacher in this indoor class and their energy levels are very low" versus

"the students are very eager to learn now, asking lots of questions [during an outdoor lesson] and seem more interested than this morning" (Field notes).

Previous scholars have also noted theoretically and empirically that nature can act as a restorative environment that supports wellbeing (Hauge et al., 2014; Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Time spent in the natural environment has been shown to mitigate and prevent stress by way of attention restoration (Kaplan, 1995). Time spent learning outdoors in a natural environment can reduce impulsivity and inattention, allows for risk-taking, collaboration and conflict resolution, and therefore can enhance learning capabilities (Mann et al., 2021). As Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) put it, "nature can be inspiring, awesome, tranquil or calming" (p. 175). This shows that the outdoor setting of this, and many other NBIs, is an important part of the experience (Hauge et al., 2014; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). This natural setting adds to the experience and can support the students to gain a holistic education to enhance their social inclusion and gives the students a reason to value the programme.

Calming effect of horses

The students experienced a calming effect when in the company of the horses, exhibiting fewer strong emotions, softer voices, more focus and fewer impulsive, fast movements than when the horses were not around. This impacted their experiences in the programme and can also have an impact on their life outside of the programme as they may experience reduced stress, increased social and physiological support, relaxation and increased wellbeing. This contributes to the value of the programmes for the young people.

When observing the behaviour of the students around the horses during a group horse-riding lesson on day three,

[T]he students approached their horses very calmly and used quiet voices to talk individually to their horses. These calm interactions I observed lasted for the duration of the one-hour lesson. The students seemed confident and calm during this lesson and I noticed a visible difference in the energy level of the students compared to when they are working on the yard or in the classroom. The atmosphere was light and serene. (Field notes)

These findings are consistent with previous studies that discuss E. O. Wilson's (1984) biophilia hypothesis as a possible explanation for the calming effect of animals on humans (Beetz, 2017; Kruger & Serpell, 2010). Animals have been found to be capable of immediately destressing, de-arousing, relaxing and providing social and physiological support to humans (Beetz, 2017; Jung, 2022). This is due to our genetic and innate desire to attend to, and be attracted by, other living beings, observed as biophilia (Wilson, 1984). These are important for the health, wellbeing and social inclusion of the students.

In a similar setting to this study, Burgon (2013) also found a major theme related to calmness induced by horses. Latella and Abrams (2019) corroborated these findings in the context of equine-facilitated learning by highlighting previous studies demonstrating the calming effect of horses such as decreased inattention and distractibility. This is also confirmed by Jung (2022) who describes horses as having a large, gentle presence which can be therapeutically beneficial. When Zach's energy was making it difficult for him to focus or to engage in a task, "the group had a saying: 'What would Beau do?' Beau is a horse on the yard known for her calming energy. I heard the students repeat this throughout my time there" when they felt they needed to calm down or become focused: "*The students appear humbled in the presence of the horses*" which presented as being more reflective and respectful of the horses (Field notes). Although the longevity

of these positive effects is under-researched, even a short-term reduction in stress can support wellbeing. It is important to note, however, that, although the participants in this and other studies have reported a calming effect around animals, the role of culture and individual experience are very important determinants of how AAIs can impact an individual, and these effects are not generalisable (Blazina et al., 2011; Jegatheesan, 2019; Kruger & Serpell, 2010). To address the hesitation or fear that some individuals may face when interacting with animals, a culturally responsive framework, such as that presented by Jegatheesan (2019) is vital for professionals who wish to incorporate AAIs into their work.

Centring animal welfare

When considering working with animal partners for human benefits, centring animal welfare and wellbeing is paramount. Modelling this core value in the programme and the organisation is very important to ensure the students are well equipped and skilled to work with horses appropriately in the future.

"The students have theoretical lessons throughout the 3-year programme, some of which focus on animal welfare" (Field notes). Animal welfare is considered a multi-dimensional concept which refers to an animal's ability to cope with their environment in both a physiological and mental context (Broom, 1986). Equine welfare and wellbeing are at the core of the EAS provision within Festina Lente. "There are posters around the site that emphasise their focus on promoting horse welfare standards" (Field notes). The understanding that welfare is crucial and is an ongoing and evolving journey is the foundation of the organisation's equine welfare policy and code of ethics for equines.

"The staff have professional backgrounds working with horses and view them as a partner animal" (Field notes). The staff also

prioritise a more-than-human benefit to their services. “The horses’ well-being is paramount. Some of the horses on site are not working horses, they stay at Festina Lente even when they retire. There are also horses that are taking a break from work and live out in the fields” (Field notes). However, the foundation of AAIs has ordinarily been constructed and gauged from “What can animals do for us?” (Hatch, 2007). Thus, research within this field has noted that the animal partners are often side-lined as subordinate compared to the human participant (Gorman, 2019).

Research has progressively evidenced that the factors of environment and human-animal interactions can have a considerable impact on the welfare and wellbeing of the animal encompassing both positive and negative experiences (Mellor et al., 2020). AAIs should be considered in relation to advantages and disadvantages to both the humans and animals involved, as it is key that the benefits for humans do not offset the welfare of the animal (Glenk, 2017). As Claire remarked, “we use Troy [a mechanical horse] to learn how to ride before we can ride a real horse so that we don’t hurt the horse” (Field notes). As Dawkins (2006) wrote, “real respect for animals will come when we see them as sentient beings in their own right, with their own views and opinions, their own likes and dislikes. The animal voice should be heard” (p. 9). This aspect of the students’ learning is crucial to ensure they graduate from the course and to increase their capabilities to work with horses in the future.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that the results are not generalisable due to the small sample size. The participants do not represent everyone engaged in an NBI or VET, or everyone facing social exclusion in Ireland. Each participant is individual, and it was precisely these individual experiences this research was aiming to understand.

Another limitation of the study is the short period of time this programme was studied as it was not a longitudinal study. Future research could replicate this study across various AAIs involving young people with disabilities using a larger sample size and longitudinal data-collection methods to explore and compare the results of a variety of interventions over time. Another limitation is that only the ETP students were observed and interviewed, and the voices and opinions of the staff were not sought. This limits the ability to compare more general views on the programme, and to gain a broader understanding of how the NBI operates and what it aims to achieve. This was intentional, however, as the research was specifically looking to understand how the NBIs impact the young people involved from their perspectives. Finally, as the authors of this article are people without a disability, it would be more appropriate for people with a disability to explore this research topic. However, the research conducted incorporates the ethos of conducting research *with* people versus *on* them (Ashby, 2011). This is evident as the individuals’ voices being at the centre of the research thereby best supporting the young people with disabilities to represent themselves in the research process.

Conclusion

This case study has explored the experiences of young people with disabilities engaging in an ETP in Ireland, showcasing AAIs as a way towards social inclusion. The article began with an introduction to the topics of social exclusion, VET programmes, and NBIs, defining important terms and providing a foundational argument for the safe and ethical inclusion of animals in some social work practice for the benefit of people facing social exclusion—however, not at the expense of the welfare of the animal. Animals should not be viewed as passive tools to be used during interventions, but rather as active collaborators and animal partners in the therapeutic process. The

authors recommend that animal welfare should be central to AAIs to protect the health and wellbeing of the non-human animal involved. The research methodology and methods were then presented in relation to how the data were collected and analysed, before moving onto the findings and discussion of the themes identified.

As mentioned previously, the evidence base for the effectiveness of AAIs is limited, but growing. However, “if people focus only on the outcomes, they will miss the brilliance of the process. The magic within these interventions is found in the daily actions that are at the heart of animal-assisted interventions” (Fine, 2011, p. 134). The themes identified in this case study showcase some of this magic: the human–animal bond; the natural environment aiding learning; the calming effect of horses; and centring animal welfare. These themes are connected to the research questions connecting NBI involvement with social inclusion, capability enhancement and leading valuable lives. This article argues that NBIs have the potential to support the health, wellbeing and social inclusion of participants, as evidenced in previous literature and in the findings of this case study.

Adding to the current discourse on the ecosocial approach in social work, this case study showcases an alternative way for social workers to work with the help of the natural environment through NBIs. Implications for social work include: (i) integrating more-than-human aspects into practice; (ii) engaging in the safe and ethical inclusion of non-human animals into social work for reciprocal benefits to human and more-than-human wellbeing; and, (iii) extending practice contexts into natural environments where service users can benefit from the therapeutic natural setting. The authors assert that social work and relevant disciplines can consider AAIs and VETs as innovative and beneficial for the social inclusion of some young people with disabilities engaged in their services. These interventions can support participants

to contribute effectively and meaningfully in society by improving their health and wellbeing, and enhancing relations providing a beneficial learning environment in and with nature.

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