

**An exploration of the experience and impact of Equine Facilitated Learning
(EFL) on a group of Year 5 children in a mainstream primary school.**

by

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The Challenge

There is a need nowadays for schools in particular to find alternative and novel approaches to managing a wide range of issues commonly encountered in school, especially with regards to children with Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) issues. According to the Department for Education (DFE) statistics in 2014, 1 in 10 children reportedly have an SEMH need in the UK and it is likely that in 2018, this number will have increased. Mental Health Statistics (mentalhealth.org.uk 2018) state that 10% of 5-16year olds have a clinically diagnosable mental health issue, and 70% of children and adolescents have not had appropriate interventions at a sufficiently early age.

The DFE (2016) Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools advice document suggests schools should do everything they can to intervene early in supporting children and young people with mental health issues. Some of the protective factors the DFE lists as important for developing resilience could be encouraged and developed through EFL intervention. Behaviour management in particular is a growing problem within schools – poor behaviour in schools adds to the stress of a teacher's already stressful and busy life and there has been talk of teachers leaving the profession because of it and many children find themselves excluded. There is a growing trend

of children out of school with nowhere for them to go as Pupil Referral Units are bursting at the seams, hence the need for schools needing to manage issues within house however all too often budget cuts make this challenging.

So how can Equine Facilitated Learning help?

Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL) is a fairly new field having been around for about 15 years in the UK and even longer in America, where Equine Assisted Activities/therapy were initially used for helping disabled children. Interventions incorporating equines such as Equine Assisted Psychotherapy were also developed in America for sufferers of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and it is thought that the growing body of interventions we hear of today including Equine Facilitated Learning or Equine Assisted Learning developed from this.

There is a lack of empirical research in the field of EFL and as studies in this area still seem to be developing, most research focuses on trying to determine what EFL is and what it does. This is important because if advocates of EFL want investors such as local authorities or schools to buy into EFL as an intervention, then there needs to be evidence available to stipulate what EFL can do and in what contexts it can be used. Research has been completed internationally for example in the USA, Canada, UK, Singapore, Australia and Norway, in a range of establishments and with a variety of children/adolescents with different backgrounds and needs in an attempt to find out more about EFL. The range of research participants include those with learning difficulties, drug/alcohol misuse, mental health issues, challenging behaviour and those considered 'at risk' of social or educational failure. Findings from the research reviewed have led me to believe that EFL provides a

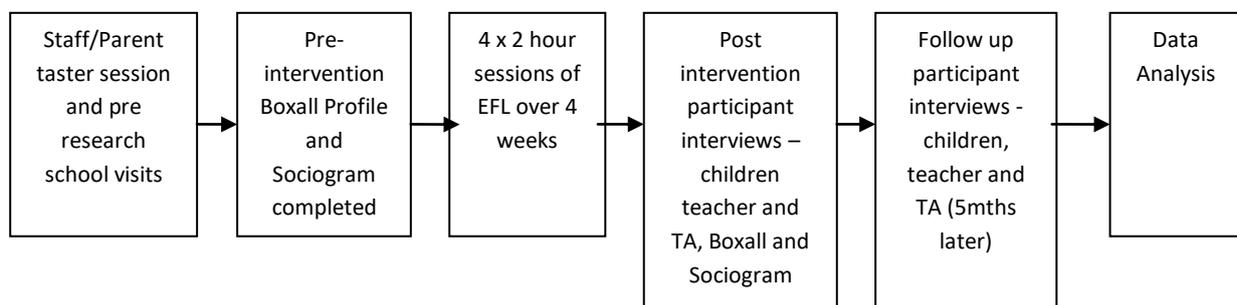
range of positive benefits to the children and young people with whom it has been used as an intervention.

My research is an exploratory study looking at the impact and experience of equine facilitated learning on a group of Year 5 children in a mainstream primary school. I chose a case study type approach and the use of a mixture of methods which I considered appropriate for both answering the research questions and that would give me as much information as possible about the potential impact that EFL had upon the children and school, but also the experiences of EFL from the viewpoint of the children themselves.

What we did

The children participated in the EFL sessions for two hours per week over a period of four weeks. The children followed HorseHeard's 'Being Friends' programme, which is an established EFL programme written and developed by HorseHeard for use with both primary and secondary aged children. The programme can be adapted to meet the needs of specific schools, age groups and time frames. For the purposes of this research, due to funding and time restraints, four sessions were planned.

Summary of The Research Process



The sessions included a variety of classroom based activities including discussions, games and written tasks. The children were given opportunity to speak, ask questions and be heard. Arena based activities included opportunities to groom and get to know the horses, individual tasks, group tasks, leading a horse with and without a head collar and obstacle courses. The children were divided into two groups of three when working with the horses. Each group worked with a different horse and a different facilitator for each session.

What the research found:

1. **EFL has the 'Feel Good Factor'** – The children enjoyed taking part; they found it was fun and exciting, it was something new to them and it made them happy. Taking part in the intervention allowed the children to feel good about themselves.
2. **Increased perceptions of friendship and group cohesion** – The children in the participant group considered themselves to be better friends because they had taken part in the intervention. The class teacher perceived the children to have made improvements when working together in a group and their relationships with the wider class were also considered to have developed.
3. **Positive changes to behaviour** – The children considered themselves to being kinder and more helpful to each other. They appeared to engage in more positive behaviours towards each other, for example they were sharing more and much of their behaviour seemed to be less impulse driven. Changes in attitudes of staff towards the children and children towards each

other led to more positive contact with others. There were fewer incidents reported during unstructured times of the day (less name calling and falling out), the children came back into class after breaks and lunchtimes in a calmer state and this was considered by the class teacher to have had a positive effect on their learning.

4. **Increased feelings of self-worth and confidence** – The positive experiences afforded all the children a sense of achievement and feeling proud of themselves, and this in turn appeared to have a positive impact upon the children's sense of self-worth and confidence. Being part of the EFL programme created memorable experiences for most of the children and through an experiential learning approach, provided opportunity to learn and practice a variety of skills, including those necessary for positive social development, leadership, collaborative learning and problem solving away from their normal classroom learning environment. In some cases, this learning was transferred to other areas of school or home life.
5. **The TA (Teaching Assistant) is central to the process** – The TA had a shared experience with the children and played an important role in the reflective process throughout the sessions and back in school. The consistent support of the TA allowed follow up when back in school/reinforcement of skills learned in sessions and the pinpointing of positive examples of behaviour, attitude, problem solving, teamwork and facilitating the children in making sense of what they have experienced and what, if anything, they learned from their experiences. This contributed to the development of positive relationships between children and staff and lead to positive changes in both behaviour and attitudes.

6. **EFL and SEMH Support in School** – Taking part in an intervention in a place other than school provides an opportunity for school to meet the needs of children who may otherwise be reluctant to engage or are at risk of social exclusion, through a positive and novel approach to learning which takes them out of their comfort zone and a chance to do something they have possibly not done before. Unlike other school based approaches in which targets are often set for children, EFL allows children to identify their own targets or areas of need, as did the children in this research, and as such creates a personalised and unique learning experience for each child. EFL could be used to offer support to those with SEMH. EFL has potential to boost confidence, self-esteem, improve social skills and promote positive behaviour change. EFL has the flexibility to be incorporated into PHSE/Whole School Curriculum offering a potential to improve behaviour around school, possibly reducing the need for schools to use commissioned services.