

From Healing to Depoliticization: A Freirean Critique of Experiential Learning in Equine-Assisted Education

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ABSTRACT

Equine-assisted education (EAE) is often presented as an experience for helping children develop emotionally through contact with horses. This theoretical paper proposes a Freirean critique of the main discourse in equine-assisted education. Although EAE often employs language that appeals to people's sense of experience, most of the current research has not connected therapeutic practice with Dewey's democratic ideals and Freire's structural critique of oppression. Many EAE programs present trauma as a personal problem, organise private recovery activities, and use horses for therapy in a relatively apolitical setting. Therefore, the structure may be regarded as "therapeutic depoliticisation"; that is to say, it provides emotional support but does not address poverty, institutional neglect and structural violence. Freire's idea of "banking education" does not promote the development of critical consciousness; therefore, this paper studies whether EAE has moved from educating for social transformation to educating for social adaptation. Then it puts forward a problem-posing, interspecies model of EAE that connects individual healing with critical reflection on power, inequality and social justice.

KEYWORDS

Critical pedagogy; Equine-Assisted Education (EAE); Banking education; False generosity; Conscientization; Paulo Freire.

1. INTRODUCTION

Equine-assisted education (EAE) has begun to attract the attention of scholars and practitioners around the world as a new type of relational and highly experiential education. Learning by doing is in line with the original educational idea that experience can be used for learning, and it motivates students to participate actively in class. Although these programmes have been widely promoted, their underlying political connotations and structural consequences of this pedagogical borrowing have not been investigated. Although there is a general idea of a "healing experience" in the literature on emotional adjustment and emotion regulation, few studies have explored how this idea incorporates social suffering into therapy or what larger systems of power it neglects.

"Therapeutic depoliticisation" in this paper refers to the process by which EAE discourse reconfigures social suffering as a problem of individual emotion to be addressed through private, apolitical therapy. At this time, the suffering caused by poverty, institutional indifference, social exclusion or structural violence may be expressed as trauma, anxiety, emotional dysregulation, behaviour problems, and so on. Education is not politically neutral; thus, in terms of critical pedagogy, it either supports the existing power structure or seeks to change it. Therefore, the therapeutic system of EAE requires political and philosophical studies. If trauma is only seen as an internal deficiency that can be corrected in a safe and controlled environment, such as a therapy centre or riding school, then the

social conditions that caused the trauma in the first place will be ignored. The problem is not whether EAE can comfort the children, but rather whether that comfort is free from the institutional and economic reasons for their distress.

This paper is a conceptual paper and does not contain empirical data or an empirical study. Based on Dewey's theory of experience and Freire's ideas of banking education, false generosity and conscientisation are put forward to offer a theoretical critique of the selected EAE discourse. The main problem is that some current discussions of experiential learning in EAE may be reducing to therapeutic depoliticisation. Thus, healing is seen as a person's adjustment process; good therapy can help vulnerable groups cope with powerlessness more calmly, but it may fail to help them recognise or challenge the structural origins of that powerlessness. Although people and animals can be used for therapy, this paper does not endorse it. Instead, it asks whether this therapeutic effect is occasionally used to comfort the victims of the wounds without altering the circumstances that led to those wounds. First, the paper examines the selective appropriation of experiential frameworks in EAE; then, it applies a Freirean critique to the banking structure and false generosity of this system; finally, it puts forward a path for conscientisation in the equine arena. The history of animal-assisted intervention can also be cited for this. Biomedical and psychological models have often presented these interventions in terms of measurable psychological and behavioural outcomes; as a result, less attention has been paid to the qualitative and sociological causes of distress. This historical preference for measurable adjustments has continued to shape EAE practice and made it more suitable for behavioural conformity than for critical and democratic education.

2. THE DEWEYAN FRAMEWORK IN EAE

Most EAE programmes are classified as experiential learning in general. Through the above interventions, the participants have learned by being close to horses, observing how they communicate without words, and also noting changes in their own bodies and emotions (Fine & Andersen, 2021). It seems that this kind of teaching is in line with Dewey's idea of learning by doing, and thus passive assimilation of pre-packaged knowledge is avoided (Dewey, 1938). Dewey proposed that education should not only prepare students for life in the future but also enable them to participate actively and democratically in the present society through experience for more all-around development (Dewey, 1916).

However, at present, many applications of EAE also show a high degree of selectivity and political constraint in their reading of experiential philosophy. Although the EAE programmes have readily borrowed the methodological idea of "learning by doing", they often fail to meet the higher and more demanding requirements that Dewey put forward for the organisation of inquiry, community participation and final social reconstruction (Biesta, 2014). Most EAE programmes are organised as closed and tightly controlled micro-environments that have been deliberately separated from the outside world. Under the above-mentioned controlled conditions, some basic self-regulation and emotional-control abilities have been learned by the participants through training (Hauge et al., 2014). Although these psychological benefits are good, they are still individualistic and do not address the social reasons for the distress. Therapeutic experiences are no longer directly related to the reasons for a person's distress in society.

Isolation of Therapy is also a problem in politics and policy. If, after returning from the equine arena, a participant can show an improved ability for self-regulation in behaviour, independently handle serious life-related problems, and communicate calmly with people in positions of power, then the EAE program will be considered therapeutically successful (Fine & Andersen, 2021). However, the above results may not meet Dewey's democratic idea of experience. Dewey did not want to create a good and well-adjusted person through experience (Dewey, 1938). The problem is how to promote the feeling of healing in society through active participation. Many of the current EAE frameworks fail to meet the higher and more demanding requirements that Dewey put forward for the organisation

of inquiry, community participation and social reconstruction (Biesta, 2014; Dewey & Bentley, 1949). Furthermore, some of the Deweyan ideas of "continuous experience" have also been to some extent overlooked by this organisation. Dewey believed that all authentic experience is based on the past, and by improving the quality of one's future life, one can continuously increase the capacity to interact with and alter the world (Dewey, 1938). However, when EAE builds an artificial, utopian sanctuary in the stable area that is a place of unconditional positive regard and simplified, non-verbal communication, it creates a harsh and insurmountable gap with the actual socio-economic environment of the students. The skills that can be gained in the training area are relatively specific to this artificial environment and are often difficult to apply in the real, oppressive life of the participants (Biesta, 2014).

3. FREIRE'S CRITIQUE: BANKING EDUCATION AND FALSE GENEROSITY

Paulo Freire's first idea of oppression in the critical framework is that it is structural; thus, in educational efforts, either this structure is directly addressed and fought against, or it will remain unchanged by education (Freire, 1970; 2000). Freire put forward the concept of a "banking model of education" and considered knowledge to be a fixed resource; thus, he had authoritative teachers deposit this knowledge into passive students. In this hierarchical model, the teacher is positioned as the knower, and the student is treated as an object to be managed or corrected; there is no genuine dialogue, and the goal of education is only for learners to accept reality as it is (Macedo, 2017).

Freirean analysis shows that the therapeutic system of EAE is, in fact, an extension of the banking model. Although it appears to be an active, external modification at the surface, the therapeutic system for EAE often employs the banking model. The therapist or facilitator assumes the role of an authoritative "knower", sets the desired therapeutic goal, positions the student as the subject whose behaviour needs to be improved, and uses a horse as the medium for practising emotional regulation (Darder, 2018; Hauge et al., 2014). This interpretation is supported by the standard descriptions of equine-assisted activities, which are organised, stable-based sessions that use horses and riding to enhance the social support, self-esteem and self-efficacy of adolescents (Hauge et al., 2014). Although the above results are not inherently negative, the structure generally only shows success through adaptation and behaviour modification, and avoids open-ended critical discussion about why a participant feels distressed. Facilitators have designed interactions to achieve a particular, desired behaviour in the participants, and these are generally not open-ended discussions about why someone is in distress. The students are not expected to learn how to think critically about life in the real world; instead, they need to be able to manage their emotions (Giroux, 2011).

It can also be regarded as Freire's concept of "false generosity". Freire believed that the powerful group may offer acts of charity to alleviate the harm caused by an unjust system without changing the system itself (Freire, 1970; 2000). False generosity provides temporary relief but does not address the root cause of the problem, and thus fails to help the oppressed class (Macedo, 2017). Given the situation of EAE, offering equine therapy to young people who have been bullied, face poverty, discrimination or institutional neglect may fail to address the root causes of their distress and is thus likely to be a "false generosity" (Darder, 2018; Freire, 1970; 2000). The recipients of this structure are not only the young participants. Schools, welfare organizations, funding institutions and referral centres will also be helped; as a result, emotionally calmer and more compliant participants reduce institutional pressure for these organisations to deal with bullying, poverty, racism or neglect. In other words, the therapeutic support will alleviate the suffering that can be seen, but the reasons for that suffering are not fixed. Therapy can help to reduce the immediate psychological damage caused by the oppressive circumstances and assist the student in coping with the injustice; however, it does not cultivate a critical consciousness and a demand for justice in the student. The good of the healing

meeting is artificial because, in the end, it serves to maintain the repressive conditions of life and make the oppressed more compliant with structural violence (Giroux, 2011).

4. THE THERAPEUTIC DEPOLITICIZATION OF EAE

According to the combined modification of Deweyan experientialism and Freire's banking model, EAE is not politically aware. Therapeutic depoliticisation does not generally include the politicalisation of human suffering. By limiting the scope of trauma and behaviour problems to medicalised and individualised ones, EAE has failed to address their structural causes (Biesta, 2014). When a marginalised young person misbehaves at school, it is often due to a rational and defensive response to a life of neglect and violence in society. However, the EAE model may indirectly perceive this response as an internal emotional problem of the horse-assisted therapy and attempt to address it individually (Fine & Andersen, 2021).

Therefore, the fault of the change will be attributed to an individual rather than to society. Therapeutic assistance can teach the participants to control anger and anxiety more effectively and communicate with their authority figures reasonably; this may be represented symbolically by organised human-horse interaction in EAE environments (Fine & Andersen, 2021; Hauge et al., 2014). Therefore, EAE may function as a quiet mode of social control by having people regulate their emotions, but it does not change the social conditions that cause the distress. Thus, EAE may have achieved therapeutic depoliticisation; that is to say, the goal of a programme is to help a person return to the very system that has caused them trauma without further damage (Darder, 2018). The foundation of this system is that the world is fixed and predetermined, and only changes in a person's emotions about this world can be achieved. EAE has focused too much on psychological resilience, thus effectively shutting down the development of political resistance and shown that an outwardly progressive alternative educational model can be smoothly co-opted for the conservative function of maintaining social order (Giroux, 2011). Therefore, the focus on fostering students' mental resilience in school has ignored basic problems. Based on the above reasons, the social problems will not be solved unless people address their own emotions. An EAE program can help students reduce their anger over discrimination in education by learning equine-assisted mindfulness and thus alleviate this justified anger (Darder, 2018). Thus, the space of therapy can be used as a safety valve to release legitimate anger that cannot be expressed through structural critique, and it focuses on emotional regulation instead. Therefore, the horse arena may be used to vent one's anger about private emotional problems, and it is not viewed as a reaction to structural injustice (Giroux, 2011).

5. TOWARDS CONSCIENTIZATION IN EAE

To avoid being a tool for social control, the first goal of EAE should be adjusted according to Freire's idea of consciousness raising. Consciousness or critical consciousness refers to the learning process that recognises social, political and economic contradictions and takes conscious steps to alleviate oppressive factors in one's own life (Freire, 1970; 2000). Rather than being a closed-loop system of individual emotional regulation, an EAE programme based on conscientisation would use the human-equine encounter as a starting point for broader social investigation (Macedo, 2017).

Therefore, we need to break away from the old model of "the therapist helps the child" and adopt a problem-posing educational model (Freire, 1970; 2000). In a problem-posing EAE environment, there would be a form of interspecies dialogue among the child, the facilitator and the horse, and "dialogue" would refer to embodied, affective and behavioural interactions in addition to verbal communication. The therapeutic space would help people reflect on the social reasons for their problems. Control, authority and consent in the questions about horseback riding can also be related to participants' own experiences of power and authority in daily life (Dewey, 1916). Who determines that a particular behaviour is deviant? Is the physical restraint of the horse in cooperation with or a

result of one's own power? The intervention will also determine whether the person has fully recovered and what particular social structures they are about to rejoin, and how these structures may have changed (Giroux, 2011). Based on the above questions, EAE will no longer be a place for passive learning but a dynamic centre of new ideas. Therefore, equine therapy does not need to serve as a direct way for political activism; instead, the process of therapy should avoid breaking the connection between individual healing and collective social criticism too early (Macedo, 2017). The conscious EAE system would have to be repurposed from its initial use. Horses should not be viewed as just means to serve the romance of human healing; problems of power and dependence, as well as care and control among different species, may also arise. Engage students in critical thinking about the ethical problems of using animals for people's therapy to help them learn more about the relationship between exploitation and domination (Fine & Andersen, 2021). A multi-species approach to critical pedagogy will also introduce more human stories and expand the participants' awareness of power, consent and coercion in all corners of society.

6. CONCLUSION

Equine-assisted education has also developed in line with experiential learning. As shown in the Freirean critique above, its main therapeutic system is still politically limited. EAE is often used to make the trauma more intimate, to keep the recovery process private, and to exclude politics. It can help the marginalised people face the difficulties of life in different ways by providing emotional support through interaction with animals, but it does not address the structural reasons for their distress. Without the democratic and social demands suggested by Dewey's ideas of experience, EAE may be integrated into a banking model of education and thus create a situation of "false generosity". The above criticisms should not be regarded as an objection to the psychological benefits of EAE, but rather as a demand for adding therapeutic support that is both ethical and politically aware. In light of the above goals, EAE should promote conscientisation proactively. It should ensure that the healing space is in line with society, and the work of alleviating individual suffering should not be separated from problems of social justice; thus, support for one's mental health can become a necessary prerequisite to pursuing justice. Only when EAE is no longer a private therapy adjustment and adopts critical, problem-posing dialogue will it promote both emotional resilience and social change.

Thus, the critique suggests that EAE programs should connect the horse-riding activities of participants with their own lives. Facilitators should ask "How do you feel?" in addition to "What in your school, family, community or institution is making you feel this way?" Therefore, programme evaluation should include reflection, dialogue and referral paths for structural problems, and not only focus on whether there has been calmer behaviour, better self-regulation or easier reintegration into the same environment. Thus, EAE can continue to be therapeutically supportive and, at the same time, align better with Dewey's democratic education and Freire's problem-posing pedagogy.

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