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# An Exploratory Study of the Role an Equine- Assisted Learning Programme plays in Diverting Young People from Criminal Pathways

Francisca O'Kelly  
*Technological University Dublin*

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# **An Exploratory Study of the Role an Equine-Assisted Learning Programme plays in Diverting Young People from Criminal Pathways**

A thesis submitted to the Dublin Institute of Technology in partial fulfilment for award of Masters (M.A.) in Criminology

By

**Francisca O'Kelly**

2015

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## **Declaration:**

I hereby declare that the material submitted in this thesis towards the award of Masters (M.A.) of Criminology is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any other assessment other than part fulfilment of the award named above.

Signature of candidate: \_\_\_Francisca O’Kelly\_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_30<sup>th</sup> September 2015\_\_\_\_\_

Word Count: \_\_\_\_\_15,568\_\_\_\_\_

## **Abstract**

Interest in the potential of equine-assisted therapy and learning, where horses are incorporated in therapeutic, rehabilitative and educational interventions to ameliorate emotional, behavioural and social issues, has increased in the past half century. More recently, equine-assisted therapy and learning has been utilised in social work and penal contexts, such as in the rehabilitation and support of at-risk youth and young prisoners. However, there is a dearth of empirical research and published evaluative studies examining the effectiveness of these emerging programmes. The purpose of this study is to explore the role that a Dublin-based equine-assisted learning programme plays in diverting young people from criminal pathways. The perceived impact and personal experiences of participants participating in the equine-assisted learning programme are explored using a qualitative research approach. The findings that emerged from the study indicate that the development of empathy, self-esteem, self-efficacy, feelings of hope and belonging, practical skills, and positive relationships with practitioners, were facilitated through this equine-assisted intervention. These, in turn, support the desistance process for the young people and assist them in the transition towards more positive life outcomes.

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **1.0 Introduction**

### **1.1 Urban Horses**

In the 1990s in some of the large council housing estates that encircled Dublin, a unique cultural phenomenon spontaneously emerged. At this time in Ireland, it was mainly farmers and the wealthy business and professional class that could afford the privilege of horse ownership. However, during this time Dublin's urban horse culture evolved. In the 1960s in Dublin, horses were not an unusual sight and most milk floats were horse drawn. Much of this disappeared in the 1970s, with cars and vans becoming more in use. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, people from the Travelling community were settled in council houses in the outer suburbs of the city, and many retained their love of horses that has long been a fundamental part of Travelling culture. The horses that once pulled caravans around Ireland ended up tethered in the gardens of council houses in Dublin. Many of the residents of the housing estates followed suit and this unique equestrian culture evolved. One of the contributing factors to the growth of this horse culture was the easy availability of cheap horses. On the first Sunday of every month, at Smithfield Market in the centre of Dublin, a horse fair took place, where ponies and horses could be bought for next to nothing. Sadly, many of the young people buying the horses had little idea how, nor had the adequate means to care for them. Consequently, the Dublin Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (DSPCA) campaigned for the introduction of regulations governing the care and ownership of horses. In 1997 The Control of Horses Act came into effect, and according to the new law, horses had to be micro-chipped and licensed at a cost of 25 pounds at the time. Licenses are issued dependant on the horses being kept in stables with at least one acre of privately held land, and the owner must be more than 16 years old.

Unfortunately, this new law did not take into account that many of the young people who owned horses at this time were from socio-economically deprived communities

where low-level educational attainment, crime and drug addiction were rife. The horses played a huge part in their lives and filled a vacuum where education, opportunities and hope should have been. For many, the choice was stark - drugs or crime versus horses. The Control of Horses Act 1997 did not address that bleak choice, nor were any resources given to the communities to fund alternative activities for the young people involved, and little by little this unique horse culture was eroded. In response, some enterprising local community groups attempted to set up proper stables and run projects with the aim of educating owners in the correct care of horses. They could see that keeping horses enriched the lives of the young people, helped them to develop a sense of responsibility, and diverted them from negative alternatives such as drugs and crime. One such group was the Castletown Equine Education and Training Centre (CEETC) upon which this study is based. For the purpose of the research the name of the centre has been changed in order to safeguard the anonymity of the young people who took part in the study.

## **1.2 Context: The Castletown Equine Education and Training Centre**

Nestling in the ominous and forbidding shadow of the walls of a Dublin prison lies the CEETC. A place of hope and optimism, where the community has united to strive for better outcomes for the young people of the area. The CEETC opened in 2003 with the overall aim of addressing the serious educational disadvantage that existed in Castletown and the surrounding areas. It originated as a community led initiative to provide a facility and services to enable young people at-risk to access quality education and training as an alternative to an unstructured life of boredom, anti-social behaviour and substance abuse. The local community identified the need for specific services for this target group, and the facility, which stands on 12 acres, was purpose built by Dublin City Council and the Department of Agriculture. The CEETC is unique in that horses are an integral element to their education programme. The founding principles of the Centre are:

### *1.2.1 Education*

The Casteltown Community Training Centre (CTC) is part of the Youthreach provision within the City Of Dublin Education and Training Board and is one of a network of thirty-eight CTCs throughout Ireland. The CTC caters for forty-five students at any one time. The CTC is an integral part of the centre, delivering QQI Level 3 and 4 courses

targeted at early school leavers aged between 16 and 21 years, and has always been successful in attracting large numbers of students to attend, most notably due to the historical link to horse ownership in the community and the presence of the equestrian elements to the training programmes.

### *1.2.2 Supporting Young People*

In addition to the forty-five students who attended the Community Training Centre, approximately 230 youths were engaged in programmes run by the Youth Service every week in 2014. The Youth Service works collaboratively with the CTC and The Equestrian Centre to identify and support young people facing challenges in their lives.

### *1.2.3 Breaking the Cycle of Crime*

Statistics compiled by the Irish Youth Justice Service (2013) indicate that the majority of young people grow out of crime by about 21 years, however a small number persist. The CEETC provides a wide range of programmes and supports as well as recreational opportunities for young people which go a long way to support families and communities to divert youths from getting involved in anti social and criminal activity. In addition to this, and with a particular focus on young offenders, the Centre operates one of the 100 Garda Youth Diversion Projects in Ireland.

All of these services are integrated around the Equestrian Centre and many of the programmes are equine themed in recognition of the long horse heritage in the area. The potential of using equines in educational and therapeutic settings is becoming more and more recognised in the United States and the UK. Equine-Assisted Learning (EAL) and Equine-Assisted Therapy (EAT) are experiential interventions in which horses are incorporated, in a therapeutic capacity, to ameliorate mental, behavioural and social issues (Burgon, 2014). A review of the literature identified that the title, Equine-Assisted Therapy (EAT) is used interchangeably with other appellations, including Equine-Assisted Learning (EAL). While EAT is practiced by someone with a mental health qualification, and is a form of psychotherapy, EAL can be practiced by people from many spheres of life including teachers, coaches, and professionals from the equine industry. For the purpose of this study the term EAL will be used hereafter throughout the study and will refer to the programme that the researcher aims to study.

It must be noted that the lack of standardised terminology hinders the development of a universal understanding of EAL.

### **1.3 Rationale**

The rationale for the study was to contribute to the burgeoning research base regarding the use of EAL to work with vulnerable young people some of whom have involvement with the criminal justice system. The study attempts to shine an investigative light onto the intervention of using equine activities to assist young people to develop the psychosocial competencies deemed necessary to facilitate them in ‘growing out of crime’, thus attempting to improve the outcomes for young people who have come into contact with the criminal justice system. The study intends to contribute to the knowledge in this area, which may assist policy makers and those involved in service design and delivery, potentially resulting in lowering crime, assisting more at-risk young people to successfully navigate their journey to adulthood with minimal criminal justice intervention, and thereby reducing the cost to the taxpayer. Consequently, the study endeavours to improve the lives of young people through the provision of quality, evidence-informed targeted interventions, and in doing so, contribute to safer communities. Further, as the researcher has worked as a social care practitioner for many years with young people, it has become more and more apparent that building on young people’s inherent resources and developing their skill sets is the key to empowerment and positive outcomes for them. The CEETC is unique in that it recognised and harnessed the keen horse heritage of the area in order to successfully engage the young people. The research evidence suggests that this strengths based approach is vital to the successful engagement and positive development of young people and would like to contribute to the evidence base in this area so that the paradigm shift away from a deficits based approach towards a strengths based approach may be fully realised.

### **1.4 Research Question**

What, if any, role does the EAL programme play in diverting young people from offending behaviour?

#### *1.4.1 Research Sub-Questions*

- What psychosocial competencies are being developed through their participation in the EAL programme that assists the young people to move away from ‘risky’ and criminal behaviours?
- What practical skills are being developed through participation in the programme?
- What is the relevance of the relationship between the practitioner and the participant?

### **1.5 Aim of the Study**

Using a qualitative research approach the study aimed to explore the young people’s experiences with the objective of yielding rich data that helped to identify whether the EAL programme plays a role in assisting the young people to move away from offending behaviour.

### **1.6 Objectives of the Study**

- To explore what it is about working with horses that seems to facilitate the development of psychosocial competencies in young people.
- To gain an insight into the practical and educational skills that are gained through participation in the course.
- To explore the importance of the relationship with the worker/practitioner in assisting young people to move away from offending behaviour.
- To explore why the CEETC is successful in retaining early school leavers in education.
- To add to the burgeoning research base in the area of using equine activities with young people at risk.
- To lay the groundwork for future studies in this area and to encourage policy-makers to consider new and innovative ways of working with hard to reach young people.

## **1.7 Organisation of Chapters**

The study is divided into five chapters. Chapter one has introduced the context of the subject, describes the CEETC and explains its structure and operation and the context from which it took root, outlined the rationale, the research question, and the aim and objectives of the study. Chapter two analyses the existing literature on desistance, desistance and youth offending, strengths-based approaches and Equine-Assisted Activities. Chapter three describes the chosen methodology for the study, outlining access and consent as well as considering the ethical factors intrinsic to carrying out research with children and young people. Chapter four presents the findings thematically, analyses them and offers discussion while paying cognisance to the literature review. In conclusion, chapter five answers the research question, offers recommendations and considers the limitations of the study.

# CHAPTER TWO

## 2.0 Literature Review

This review considers the literature and research evidence relating to the three key concepts central to the present study; desistance from offending, youth justice interventions and Equine-Assisted Learning. The review begins by highlighting the complexities involved in the study of desistance and will then seek to clarify definitional issues. Several theories that aim to explain the desistance process will then be presented. Next, the review will give an outline of the research pertaining specifically to the desistance process in the context of youth offending and implications for service provision and practice are considered. Following this the review outlines a brief history of the use of animals in therapeutic practice settings, and more specifically, looks at how and why the area of EAL has developed. Finally, a review of the most recent empirical evidence relating to using EAL as an intervention with at-risk youth will be given and limitations of the research will be outlined. The aim of the chapter is to provide a detailed synthesis of the existing literature in the three areas and to set the context from which the fieldwork will be presented in later chapters.

### 2.1 Desistance Theory and Research

Any exploration of desistance from crime in relation to young people must be considered against the pattern known as the ‘age-crime curve’ (Seymour, 2012). The best predictor of whether a person will desist from crime or not is his or her age. One of the few near certainties in relation to the study of desistance, is that for the majority of people, offending behaviour peaks in the teenage years, and then starts to decline (Irish Youth Justice Service, 2013). This phenomenon is known as the ‘age-crime curve’ and it is one of the only areas that criminological theorists have managed to reach a consensus on (McNeill, Farrall, Lightowler and Maruna, 2012). While the majority of young people grow out of crime, a small number persist. These young people continue to demand attention in terms of understanding the specific contexts that lead to and sustain offending behaviour and also those that influence desistance.



Desistance theorists seek to explore and identify the complex social and psychological processes that occur and ultimately result in offenders desisting from, or moving away from criminal behaviour. Producing or encouraging desistance is the implicit focus of much criminal justice policy, practice and research and it is one of the key outcomes that criminal justice interventions are designed to achieve (McNeill et al., 2012). Somewhat surprisingly then, after a review of the desistance literature, it is evident that criminological theorists have neither reached a consensus on the definition of desistance nor have they been able to clearly identify the actual process underlying it. Desistance is a difficult area for criminologists to observe, as it is not an event that happens, rather the absence of events, in this case criminal offending (Maruna, 2001, p.17). Some see desistance as the permanent cessation of offending over several years, whilst others take a more fluid definition of desistance, recognising that episodes of re-offending may occur (McNeill, 2014). McNeill (2014) breaks down the desistance process into stages of primary desistance and secondary desistance. Primary desistance can be defined as an offence free period, while secondary desistance is a positive change in the self-identity of an ex-offender that leads to sustained desistance. More recently, there have been calls for a tertiary level of desistance to be included; that of social and judicial recognition for those who have successfully maintained a crime free life (McNeill, 2014).

Based on their extensive review of the desistance literature, Laub & Sampson (2001) conclude that a life-course perspective provides the most compelling theoretical framework and further, that desistance stems from a variety of complex processes—psychological, developmental, and sociological—and thus, there are several factors associated with it. They suggest that the following factors are strong correlates to desistance: aging; an intimate relationship; securing legal, stable work; and transformation of identity. Laub & Sampson (1993) also developed the notion of a bond between an individual and society and theorised that offending behaviour is more likely to occur when this bond is weakened or broken. Although Laub & Sampson's work has proved popular in recent times it is not without its critics. Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002) point out that a potential limitation of their important body of work is that the sample on which the analyses were based was made up entirely of white male offenders who matured into adulthood during the 1950s. Therefore it is not clear whether the theory derived from the findings can effectively capture the experiences of other types of offenders such as females or minority delinquents or, more generally,

offenders coming of age within the context of a more contemporary social and economic landscape (Giordano et al., 2002).

Maruna (2001) stresses the importance of the development of positive narratives and self-identity for people in the desistance process and concludes that 'to desist from crime offenders need to develop a coherent, pro-social identity for themselves' (p.7). He identified that individuals who were able to desist from crime had high levels of self-efficacy and had found a way to 'make sense' of their lives and upbringings. The desisting ex-prisoners he interviewed often said they wanted to put their experiences 'to good use' by helping others avoid the mistakes they had made. LeBel, Burnett, Maruna and Bushway (2008) carried out a study of 130 male property offenders, interviewed in the 1990s and followed up 10 years later. The results of this 10-year follow-up analysis seem to indicate that the psychological outlooks of men about to leave prison are at least marginally significant predictors of post-imprisonment outcomes. For participants in this study, remorse for one's past involvement in crime, self-identification as a 'family man', a belief in self-efficacy and a sense of hope seem to contribute positively to the desistance process. Le Bel et al., (2008) purport that with an adequate sense of hope, a person may both opt into and take advantage of positive social opportunities, such as employment or intimate relationships and be better able to endure disappointments or setbacks in these areas, so long as the problems are not extreme. Similarly, Barry (2006), emphasises the need for both individual, agency based change, combined with and related to, social opportunities and social recognition in order to lead to the sustainability of secondary desistance.

## **2.2 Youth Offending and Desistance**

Seymour (2012) explains desistance through a developmental lens and suggests that a successful move away from offending behaviour is assisted by the development of improved psychosocial competencies and skills in late adolescence, which assist the majority of young people to make more mature and responsible choices and consequently to move away from impulsive and offending behaviours. The clear relationship between ageing and desisting from crime has led some authors to argue that desistance from crime is a natural or even biological process (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983) and accordingly, in the context of youth justice policy-making, cognisance should

be given to the fact that many young people 'grow out' of crime. This widely agreed consensus raises the issue of whether young people who commit minor offences should even be dealt with through the criminal justice system as the evidence tells us that the majority of these young people will naturally desist as they mature. Diversion from the criminal justice system is seen by some as the most effective way to promote desistance from youth offending. In McAra and McVie's *Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime* they assessed the effectiveness of the Scottish Model of Youth Justice and concluded that the more involved a juvenile is in the system, the less likely it is that they will desist. They point to a growing body of international research, which indicates that contact with the criminal justice system is inherently criminogenic for young people and that the key to reducing youth offending and promoting desistance from crime is through "maximum diversion and minimum intervention" (2007, p.340). McAra and McVie further elaborate that "... systems appear to damage young people and inhibit their capacity to change...and never will deliver justice"(2007, p.340).

In her Scottish study, Barry (2006), explored the views of young people currently or previously involved in offending, asking them about facilitators and blocks to the process of desistance. Her findings indicate (1) the importance of offering constructive activities to reduce boredom and to give young people a stake in society, whether through education, leisure or employment, (2) the worker-client relationship was also stressed as being crucial to desistance, (3) the need for interventions which can motivate young people to change through positive reinforcement rather than for those which focus solely on the impact of their offending on others and (4) many of the young people expressed criminal justice system 'fatigue'. Barry (2006) further postulates that as theory of crime currently stands there seems to be a lack of congruence and continuity between the factors influencing the onset of, and desistance from, offending. On the one hand there is an acknowledgement that structural constraints tend to be identified as risk factors in young people's likelihood of starting to offend. Considering that there is such an emphasis on and recognition of the structural constraints that contribute to the onset of offending it would be natural to assume that solutions offered would be of a socio-political nature and would encompass measures that aim to address these identified socio-political/economic structural inequalities. However, this is not the case and unfortunately there is a dearth of socio-political 'solutions' offered in the desistance literature. The responsibility seems to be unfairly placed solely on the

individual to stop offending even though there is such a recognition of the structural determinants that contribute to the onset of offending (Barry, 2006).

In recent years a number of academic writers have begun to explore the implications of desistance research for practice (Farrall, 2002; Immarigeon, Maruna & LeBel, 2004; McNeill, 2006). By seeking to explore the processes through which people come to cease offending, desistance research provides a rich seam of knowledge for effectively working with offenders. Following a review of the most recent desistance research for practice, McNeill et al. (2012) stress several central themes, some of which have pertinent implications for service design and provision for young offenders. Some of these themes are: (1) Desistance, for young people who have been involved in persistent offending, is a difficult and complex process, likely to involve lapses and relapses and there is value in interventions being realistic about these difficulties and finding ways to manage setbacks and difficulties constructively; (2) The development and maintenance not just of motivation, but also of hope, become key tasks for criminal justice practitioners (Farrall & Calverley, 2006); (3) Desistance can only be understood within the context of human relationships; not just relationships between workers and offenders but also between offenders and the significant people in their lives (McNeill, 2006); (4) Although the focus is often on offenders' deficits and needs, they also have strengths and resources that they can utilise to overcome obstacles to desistance. Developing these capacities can be a useful aspect of criminal justice practice (Maruna & LeBel, 2003); (5) Since desistance is in part about discovering self-efficacy or agency, interventions are most likely to be effective where they encourage and respect empowerment; (McNeill, 2006); (6) Interventions need to work on developing social capital and opportunities to apply these skills; (7) The language of practice should endeavour to more clearly recognise positive potential and development, and should seek to avoid identifying people with the negative behaviours (McNeill et al., 2012).

### **2.3 Implications for Youth Justice Service Provision and Practice**

Taking into consideration the above conclusions by McAra & McAvie, Barry and McNeill et al., in relation to Youth Justice policy-making and service provision, the rational conclusion is that any interventions that aim to target young people who offend, or who are at-risk of offending, should be designed to pro-actively engage young

people, they should not be punitive in nature or perceived as such, they should address issues around marginalisation, they should offer opportunities in relation to work and education, and they should aim to develop the young people's strengths and resources. As stated previously, much of the literature and research concerning young people and offending behaviour seems to be overly concerned with 'risk' and the risk factors that contribute to their offending behaviour and therefore focuses on, among other things, young people's deficits and problem behaviours (Laursen, 2000). Within the last decade researchers and practitioners within the fields of education, psychology, social work, and child welfare have begun to challenge this deficits based approach and move towards a more holistic model of development. Studies underscored the reality that most young people manage to flourish and develop, in spite of the presence of multiple risk factors in their lives. Rutter (1993) and others began to use the term 'resilience' to describe the set of qualities that supports healthy development in the face of adversity. Youth advocates began to perceive adolescence as a process dominated not by difficulties and risk, but by positive opportunities for young people to learn, assist, and benefit from their interactions with pro-social adults and communities (Benson & Pittman, 2001).

This new strength-based, resilience-oriented perspective on adolescence is known as positive youth development (PYD), a term in use since at least the early 1970s (Polk & Kobrin, 1972). The basic principle of PYD is that even the most disadvantaged young person can develop positively when connected to the right mix of opportunities, supports, positive roles, and relationships. While the Irish Youth Justice Service has not formally embraced this new paradigm, there are some organisations working with at-risk youth in Ireland who work from these principles. Some training centres and Garda Diversion Projects are adopting this strengths-based approach to practice and offering their participants access to opportunities in relation to work and education, aiming to develop young people's strengths and resources and incorporating new and innovative approaches to engaging at-risk young people. It is the researcher's opinion that the CEETC is one such centre that works according to the principles of PYD. Their foundation for practice originates in the manner in which they identified the existing resources and passion of the community and its youth – horses – and built on this to create a centre where education centres around equestrian activities. The concept of using equines in educational and therapeutic settings with vulnerable youths is not

unique to the CEETC and in fact it's potential is becoming more and more recognised in recent years.

## **2.4 The History of Equine Assisted Therapy and Learning**

In seeking to engage hard to reach young people policy-makers and practitioners should be constantly endeavouring to find creative and innovative ways to work with them in the move towards desistance. Equine-Assisted Learning (EAL) is an emerging form of Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT), which has a more established association with therapeutic benefits (Fine, 2000). There had been little empirical research carried out on the subject of AAT until the 1960s and 1970s when the psychologist, Boris M. Levinson, explored the subject extensively. Levinson (1978) purported that children could be assisted in the acquisition of empathy, self-control, and self-esteem, by the raising of pets. The value of using EAL is increasingly recognised in addressing issues across various contexts, including addiction, depression, eating disorders and antisocial behaviours (Burgon, 2014). This therapeutic intervention is now being used in a variety of mental health settings, particularly in the treatment of adolescents. It combines traditional therapeutic interventions with a more innovative component involving relationships and activities with horses. (Burgon, 2011).

### *2.4.1 Why Horses?*

While there is a lack of robust research evidence around the therapeutic and learning potential of the human-horse interactions, and although the integration of equine activities into therapeutic and educational settings is a relatively new development, the therapeutic benefit of the horse as a 'healing agent' (Burgon, 2011, p.167) to humans has a long history. It has been claimed that the presence of a horse can be especially effective in creating a calm, therapeutic environment (Fine, 2000). Horses can be trained, they respond to individuals and appear to get to know particular people (Brazier, 2014). A horse's behaviour will depend on how it is handled, and it will give fairly immediate and potentially dangerous feedback if not handled well. Indeed it has been suggested that one of the reasons why horses are so effective in the therapeutic milieu is due to the fact that the horse promotes consciousness and self-awareness by acting like a 'mirror', accurately reflecting and providing unbiased feedback to human

behaviour (Vidrine, Owen-Smith and Faulkner, 2002). There appears to be a built in empathic connection between horses and (most) people: when a horse is bothered or upset it feels uncomfortable for humans. Reassuring or nurturing a horse feels good; playing with a horse and gaining cooperation from such a high status animal gives great satisfaction (Laurie & Noble, 2015).

In the context of EAL, some of the attributes that horses have been found to bring to the learning environment are those of cooperation, patience, willingness, receptiveness and the equine's demands in interactions with humans are relatively simple and uncomplicated (Fine, 2000). Horse-human interactions differ from the typical companion animal-human interaction, such as that between humans and canines, in that horses are not predatory by nature but are prey animals. Consequently, their survival depends on their extreme sensitivity to the environment and they are essentially living biofeedback mechanisms with the ability to mirror or respond to the behaviour, emotions, and internal states of those around them, rather than verbal content which may be incongruent with behaviour or emotions (Meek, 2012). Attempting to act as leader for a horse takes good leadership. The qualities horses seek in a leader are pro-social qualities for humans (calm, confident, communicative, assertive, focused, empathic, energetic, sensible). As handlers learn to display these attributes, the horses offer visible and rewarding cooperation (Laurie & Noble, 2015).

## **2.5 Empirical Research of Equine Assisted Learning and Therapy Programmes**

Although it has been steadily increasing, there is still relatively little robust academic research on EAL, with many of the studies to date which concentrate on the psychosocial benefits of EAL being qualitative, case-study and anecdotal accounts by practitioners in the field (Burgon, 2014). Despite the lack of rigorous academic testing interest in the potential of employing horses as a medium to address emotional, behavioural and social issues has grown and these areas are now receiving more attention on the criminological and psychological research agendas. Practitioners and researchers now assert that the inclusion of horses in therapy can provide a myriad of psychosocial benefits (Meek, 2012). The scope of EAL is gradually expanding from its traditional use in the rehabilitation of less-able bodied individuals and adults with psychological issues, to utilising the approach in social-work contexts such as in the

rehabilitation of 'at-risk' youth (Burgon, 2011), or when traditional forms of talk-therapy fail to impact (McCormick & McCormick, 1997).

Some of the most significant psychosocial benefits of equine assisted programmes include the horse's ability to adapt behaviour in children with a history of intra-familial violence and substance abuse (Schultz, Remick-Barlow & Roberts, 2006); the establishment of adaptive skills, such as leadership, self-esteem, confidence and mastery in adolescents who were at a high risk for academic or social failure (Trotter, Chandler, Goodwin-Bond & Casey, 2008; Vidrine, Owen-Smith & Faulkner, 2002) and the development of trust (Vidrine et al., 2002, Burgon, 2014). In their exploration of the benefit of EAL for adults, Klontz, Bivens, Leinart & Klontz's (2007) psychological assessment carried out prior to, immediately following, and six months after therapy, identified significant reductions in psychological distress and enhancements in psychological well being. In order to work effectively with the horse, participants must exhibit behaviours that the horse will respond positively to, such as calm and confident leadership which can create an opportunity for learning new behaviours and feelings of self-efficacy (Burgon, 2011). Declines in anxiety levels among young people exhibiting maladaptive behavioural issues were found in a recent study by Holmes, Goodwin, Redhead & Goymour (2011). Ewing, MacDonald, Taylor & Bowers (2007) have evaluated the effects of EAL on emotionally disturbed youths, and claim that '... feelings of depression, anger and isolation were reduced through the enhancement of general psychological well-being which is transferred from the therapeutic situation to participants' daily lives (Ewing et al., 2007, p.71). In a very recent study carried out by The Horse Course in the UK which comprised of 20 young people aged 10-17 years, the researchers identified that all of the young people improved in eight core skill areas; engagement, calmness, assertiveness, focus and perseverance, communication, empathy, responsibility and realistic planning. They also noted four immediate outcomes; positive changes in identity, improved attendance, reduced problem behaviour and improved relationships (The Horse Course, 2015). The young people involved in the study were targeted for reasons of exclusion or risk of exclusion from mainstream education because of problem behaviours. Additionally they were not responding to existing talk-based interventions. Difficulties they presented with included anxiety, depression, anger, bullying, ASD, ADHD, eating disorders and self-



harm, with most participants having multiple issues and receiving support from several agencies.

Studies of EAL are still in their infancy and are fraught with methodological, ethical and epistemological difficulties, not least when looking at vulnerable and at-risk young people, together with the multitude of challenges that working with horses and young people brings. Despite these difficulties and initial scepticism around the research, preliminary reports have shown demonstrable success across a host of contexts and highlighted the value of EAL in addressing a myriad of issues, including depression and anxiety (Klontz et al., 2007), recovery from trauma and abuse (Yorke, Adams & Coady, 2008), and most recently, in working with prisoners who require assistance in breaking the cycle of criminality and imprisonment (Laurie & Noble, 2015).

When considering how an EAL programme might support the process of desistance the preliminary results and evidence from the EAL literature shows promising results. Many of the desistance researchers have identified that certain psychosocial competencies and pro-social skills need to be developed for young people in order for them to successfully move away from crime (Seymour, 2012; Maruna, 1999). Additionally, young people need to be exposed to positive opportunities and experiences, which EAL can offer. As it stands the author is unaware of any research that specifically looks at whether engagement in EAL can support the desistance process, however, if we consider the above reported psychosocial benefits of EAL, such as the development of empathy, self-esteem, self-efficacy, the exposure to positive opportunities and the improvement in core skill areas such as calmness, assertiveness, communication and empathy, then it becomes apparent that the reported EAL benefits are all skills and competencies that are required to be present for young people to successfully desist from offending behaviour and therefore one could argue that incorporating EAL programmes may be of significant benefit as a youth justice intervention.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

This chapter firstly gave an overview of the desistance literature and presented several theoretical frameworks that seek to identify the complex stages involved in the

desistance process. Desistance in the context of youth offending was then discussed and implications for practice and service design in relation to youth justice and desistance were then considered. Following on from this a brief history of the use of animals, and more specifically horses, in therapeutic/educational contexts was given and empirical evidence of this burgeoning field was then presented. The limitations regarding the empirical evidence relating to EAL were pointed out. With both the potential of this as a youth justice intervention and the limitations of much of the available research considered, further research in this area should endeavour to carry out more rigorous studies with larger sample sizes and with longitudinal follow-ups to ascertain whether the positive psychosocial improvements identified are maintained in the longer term and whether they might directly promote the process of desistance for young people.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **3.0 Methodology**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter outlines the research methodology including the research strategy, study design and method of data collection and data analysis used to conduct the study. The chapter addresses a number of ethical issues such as confidentiality and informed consent.

#### **3.2 Research Method**

Qualitative research comes from an interpretative perspective and is concerned with interpreting and understanding phenomena through the meanings that people attach to them (Greenhalgh, 2001). There has been a substantial growth in recent years in the use of qualitative methods when conducting research with young people and an interest in obtaining information directly from young people which explores their own perspective on their thoughts, feelings, experiences and opinions (Alderson, Morrow & Alderson, 2011). Given these considerations, along with the fact that qualitative research can give a richness and depth that is unlikely to be obtained through other methods, as it involves personal contact and insight and places the findings in a social, historical and temporal context, a qualitative research strategy was selected for this study. As the study was exploratory in nature it therefore fits with an approach emphasising the generation of theories, rather than testing current theories as is inherent in quantitative research (Bryman, 2008). The task of carrying out an in-depth study of the young people's experiences of the equine programme is one that ideally demands that the participants be permitted to provide information using their own terms, meanings and understandings. The proposed study will endeavour to study the participant's experiences in a comprehensive and holistic manner with the aimed-for result that the researcher will have a clearer understanding of their experiences in context. Therefore a qualitative approach will be used.

### **3.3 Data Sampling**

In total, five participants were recruited for the study. In relation to data sampling, the researcher used a purposive sampling technique, in that the sample was chosen in a deliberate way (Punch, 1998). The sample size was of five young people, and to be eligible for participation the young people needed to be (1) aged between sixteen and twenty-one and (2), be participating successfully in the EAL programme. As the study focused on the process of how young people move away from offending behaviours, the participants needed to either have had some contact with the criminal justice system, or be deemed at-risk of offending behaviour. One of the overall aims of the CEETC is to break the cycle of crime in the area therefore many of the young people participating in the equine programme would have had contact with the criminal justice system, or would be deemed at-risk of engaging in anti-social behaviours. There are younger children who participate in the equine programme, however, the researcher decided on the older age group, aged sixteen to twenty-one, due to the assumption that this group would be more able to verbalise their experiences in a confident and articulate manner and also would potentially be more capable of analysing their own experiences. This assumption is based on the researcher's extensive experience of working with young people.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

Interviews have been used extensively for data collection across all the disciplines of the social sciences and it is now generally agreed that interviewing is a fundamental method of data collection (Briggs, 1986). Semi-structured interviewing is a type of interview, which researchers use to elicit information in order to achieve a holistic understanding of the interviewee's point of view or situation (Bryman, 2008). Given that the aim of the research was to explore the experiences of the EAL participants semi-structured interviews were considered the most effective method for addressing this aim.

The data was collected by undertaking in-depth semi-structured interviews with the five respondents. The interview lengths ranged from between twenty and thirty minutes

duration. The questions were open-ended and the researcher used prompts to effectively elicit the richest data. The researcher attempted to minimise any perceived status difference between the researcher and the respondent through building up trust and a rapport with the respondent, which assisted the respondent to become more at ease and ultimately to elicit better data. The researcher's professional experience in relation to working with young people was very helpful in this context. The interviews were audio-recorded using a Tascam DR-40 field recorder and the interviews took place in a comfortable, private room at the centre, with the successfully achieved aim being that the interview could take place without interruptions. The researcher's experience of working with young people was of benefit to the interviewing process, however, there wasn't an assumption that the researcher would automatically be skilled in this area. Therefore, attention was given in relation to developing the skills necessary to carry out successful semi-structured interviews, prior to them taking place. Up-skilling in relation to using the appropriate recording technology was also addressed.

All the interviews commenced with an invitation to young people to explain how they came to be involved in the equine programme. Several key topic areas were then prompted during the interview. Participants were asked to describe the types of things they were learning while participating in the course, the rules in the yard, what they enjoyed most about the course, what horses meant to them and whether they felt they could identify any changes in themselves as a result of participating in the course, and their plans for the future. (See Appendix A for full list of questions). Specific areas, which were addressed during the semi-structured interviews, included events and circumstances leading to their contact with the centre and their journey through the EAL programme. The interview itself was informal in tone and participants were allowed to take the lead in introducing topics for discussion. This format was adopted to maximise clarity and to help the participants focus on their personal experiences of the EAL programme. All five interviews were then transcribed from the audio-recordings ensuring an accurate collection of data.

### **3.5 Ethics, Access and Consent**

Ethical considerations play a very important role in all research studies (Oliver, 2010). The overarching principles that should guide all research are that of academic integrity

and honesty, and respect for all those involved (Punch, 2006). Ethical consent was obtained in March 2015 from Dr. Kevin Lalor the Head of School of Languages, Law and Social Sciences, Dublin Institute of Technology. Furthermore and more specifically to this study are the ethical issues needed to be addressed in relation to undertaking research with children therefore *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (2011) was adhered to throughout the research process. Gaining access to the participants was fundamental to the success of the study, thus obtaining consent from the gatekeepers at the centre at the earliest opportunity was paramount. Therefore a staff member known to the researcher in a professional capacity was contacted and submitted a letter of application and a copy of the research proposal to the Board of Management on behalf of the researcher. Consent was granted and the five participants were selected from the Youthreach programme by the staff member. Whilst the researcher knew the staff member in a professional capacity measures were taken to ensure that this relationship did not compromise the research process and all ethical steps regarding access and consent were adhered to. The process of negotiating the conduct of the interviews was initiated by the staff member within the service who informed the young people about the study. The researcher was then introduced to them and at this stage, all prospective participants received detailed information on the aims of the research and the demands, in terms of time and so on, associated with participation.

### *3.5.1 Informed Consent*

The research was conducted from a child-centred perspective and fully informed written consent was obtained from all five nominated young people. As one of the participants was under eighteen his parents were required to give written informed consent, which they gave. A letter was provided to the identified centre to explain the purpose of the study and what involvement would entail for potential participants (APPENDIX D). The young people and their parents were made aware that their participation in the research was voluntary and also that they could refuse/withdraw from the research at any stage (APPENDIX B & APPENDIX C).

When conducting research with children and vulnerable groups there is a concern amongst researchers that involving them is a road, which is fraught with ethical

dilemmas, difficult to gain access to and ultimately time consuming. This may account, in some way, for the dearth of research in Ireland that focuses on young people who offend as the subject. Omitting the views of the young person is missing a valuable source of data and ultimately not providing the whole picture. Of course, there are obstacles and challenges with this type of research, but by adhering to basic principles and standards these obstacles are not insurmountable. With the ultimate aim of enabling and discovering the views of young people, there is the corresponding need to ensure that they are not subjected to exploitation and that clear standards are adhered to. After reviewing a selection of the literature concerning ethical research, the following principles are generally agreed upon: clarity in the aims and objectives of the study, honesty with and a responsibility to the subjects, a commitment 'not to harm', and a commitment to the rights and well-being of children (Bell, 2010; Whyte, 2006). In approaching the subject group of vulnerable young people who offend or who are at-risk of offending, the researcher must ask themselves whether the study will have any positive and/or negative effects on the young people in question, also, what benefit, if any, may come out of the work (Alderson et al., 2011). It is the hope of the researcher that the study will be of benefit to the participants, in that it gives them an opportunity to tell their story. Additionally, the study may shed light on the benefits of using new and innovative interventions with at-risk young people and therefore contribute to future service design and delivery.

### *3.5.2 Protection from Distress*

It is acknowledged that some of the issues raised during the interview process could cause distress or sadness for the young people involved. Prior to the interview the young people were informed that if they found any issue upsetting, then the process could be halted. Dr. Kevin Lalor, Head of School of Languages, Law and Social Sciences, recommended that the interviews be conducted at the centre so that in the event of a young person becoming distressed they could debrief with a known and trusted staff member post interview. The researcher approached the interview process itself in a sympathetic manner and listened to and observed the responses of the participants. Also, it was agreed that a summary of the research findings would be sent to all of the participants who wish to receive it following completion of the study. Finally, they were informed that a potentially positive outcome could be that the

information they provided could help promote positive changes for young people in similar situations in the future.

### 3.5.3 Confidentiality

The researcher also informed the young people and their parents that anonymity and confidentiality would be maintained at all times unless a child protection issue arose. An important issue that was considered is whether it is possible to guarantee complete confidentiality. Difficulties arise, when, during the research interview, a participant discloses information that may put either themselves or others at risk. As stated above *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (2011) were adhered to throughout the research. The researcher is very familiar with these guidelines through her work as a social care practitioner. At the beginning of each interview the researcher clarified with the young person as to the limits of confidentiality and this empowered them to control the information they chose to declare. Participants were informed at the outset of the interview that if they disclosed any information, which indicated that they were 'at risk' or 'in danger', then it was the legal obligation of the researcher to inform a relevant individual as recommended by *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (2011). To preserve anonymity the young people's names were changed and each young person was given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym. The young people were informed that the data collection for the study would be treated in the strictest of confidence. The computer on which the data is stored is password protected and paper records and interview tapes securely locked away. The participants were advised that all data with identifiable information, as well as recorded interviews would be destroyed within one year following full completion of the research.

In approaching the present study, the researcher was aware of the ethical dilemmas that present themselves when interviewing such a sample group of at-risk young people. The process of seeking informed consent from the participants, adhering to safeguards concerning privacy and confidentiality, protecting the participants from any distress, and acknowledging potential issues of power in the research process, contributed to an ethical approach in the present study.



### **3.6 Data Analysis and Coding**

In order to analyse and interpret the data in a structured manner all interviews were transcribed verbatim. This is considered to increase the validity of qualitative research findings, as it enables the researcher a valid description of what they heard during the interview (Robson, 2002). Transcribed data were then read, examined, proof read and reviewed. The interview transcripts were then analysed thematically as quickly as possible after completion of each interview. In regard to coding, the study was influenced by the principals of analysis used in Charmaz (2006) work which consists of initial coding, applying provisional codes that remain close to the data, followed by focused coding, in which the most significant codes are used to synthesise and categorise the data. The coding process eventually resulted in numerous categories that were organised into themes relating to the development of empathy, practical skills, psychosocial competencies, positive relationship-building skills, and the construction of a positive self-identity. These are some of the key processes that have been identified in the literature as assisting young people to move away from offending behaviour. As the researcher has extensive experience of working with this client group there was a risk of bias in relation to the coding. To reduce this risk when coding another student reviewed the coding system.

The findings documented in the next chapter are constructed around the young peoples' narratives allowing a range of themes to emerge from similarities and differences in their stories. Particular pieces of narrative have been selected for presentation because they illustrate broad thematic patterns observed across many of the interview transcripts. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, which is used consistently throughout the presentation of the study's findings.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

This chapter provided a detailed insight into the research methodology. It highlighted the appropriateness of using an exploratory strategy and design for the purpose of the study and the suitability of semi-structured interviews for meeting the research aim. The chapter conveyed the detailed and effective nature of the data collection and data analysis process. The chapter identified a number of ethical issues that are pertinent to

carrying out research with young people. The findings that emerged from the methodological process are presented in the following chapters.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## 4.0 Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Profile of Respondents

The following section will give an overview of the profiles of the five respondents involved in the study:

Jack, aged twenty-one, was living at home, had been participating in the Youthreach programme for the past two years, and was certified to QQI Level 4 in Horsemanship. Jack left school early, had involvement with the criminal justice system and self-reported that he was actively moving away from anti-social/criminal behaviours.

Glenn, aged eighteen, had completed the Leaving Certificate Applied, was living at home and started the Youthreach course in December 2014.

Johnny, aged sixteen, was living at home, and had left mainstream education after Junior Certificate. Johnny had been participating in the Youthreach programme for the last year and had been out of education for six months before he started at the CEETC. Johnny had taken part in trials for the Jockey Traineeship Programme at an internationally renowned race academy in early July and was hopeful of being offered a place.

Ann, aged eighteen, was also living at home and had been participating in the Youthreach programme for nearly two years. Ann left school after completing her Junior Certificate due to self-reported behavioural difficulties. Ann explained that she had a very difficult experience of mainstream schooling due to her behaviour and the way she feels she was treated:

When I was younger I was really, really hyper. Like bouncing off the walls. I was bold and I wasn't really a good girl. I didn't have a lot of patience and I had a problem with authority. The doctor had told them (the school) that and I had letters from doctors to say that I had anger problems. They knew that they had to be patient and I tried my best as well but I didn't find them that patient or helpful to me.

Ann had been out of education for nearly six months before engaging in the Youthreach programme. Ann had also taken in part in a trial for the internationally recognised Jockey Traineeship Programme.

Wiz was nineteen and had been participating in the Youthreach programme for over two years. Wiz had a negative experience of mainstream school, resulting in him being excluded from school after he completed his Junior Certificate. Wiz also had substance abuse issues and was supported in his referral to the Youthreach programme by his drug counsellor. Wiz lived with his older brother.

The Youthreach programme at the CEETC offers the following recognised courses: QQI Level 3 Employability Skills, QQI Level 4 Horsemanship and QQI Level 4 Information and Communications Technology. Each young person is assigned their own horse at the commencement of the programme and they are fully responsible for the care of their horse throughout the duration of their participation. The young people are taught equine physiology, the correct way to feed, care for, and exercise horses, and how to ride and show-jump. The young people also did leatherwork, which involves the skilled task of hand-making bridles for horses. Glenn describes some of the things he learnt:

I've learnt how to put a saddle on and how to muck out properly. Like I used to just make sure it's clean but they show you how to do everything properly and they tell you how to feed horses properly and make sure everything is proper done.

Johnny describes an average day on the Youthreach course:

Well you muck out the stables and groom the horse and then feed them. Then you'd probably go out riding and then you'd clean the horse again, skip out again and brush the horse again. Then you might go into the classrooms for some Maths or English work.

## **4.2 Findings**

A number of key findings emerged from the data collected and analysed during this study. These relate to the relevance and importance of:

1. Passion for horses and responsibility.
2. The development of empathy through relationships with horses.

3. The development of psychosocial competencies through working with horses.
4. The sense of belonging and connection facilitated through the building of positive relationships with practitioners.
5. The importance of hope and offering positive opportunities in motivating young people to change.

Hereunder findings from the research carried out through interviews are discussed in detail and supported by the literature where appropriate for analysis and comparison. The findings will be discussed under the following headings: Passion for horses and Responsibility, Empathy, Self-Esteem and Self-efficacy, Sense of Belonging, and Hope and Opportunities.

### **4.3 Passion for Horses and Responsibility**

A frequently occurring theme that emerged during the course of the research was to do with how the participants had very meaningful relationships and attachments to the horses in the equine centre. All of the young people interviewed expressed their feelings of admiration and their passion for horses and it seemed as if they all had built up strong, trusting relationships with horses in the centre or in their own personal lives. The following quotes illustrate the young people's feelings about horses: "Horses, they're brilliant animals they teach you a great work ethic" (Jack). Another participant explained her passion for all things equestrian:

They're just a big part of my life like, everything I do and all I talk about is horses. I have a huge, big picture of a horse, I have me bridles and I have me own horse's shoe in my room and everything is just horses. I just love them so much. I'm very passionate about them (Ann).

Johnny described horses in the following terms:

They're pristine. Like, horses are very intelligent animals. You wouldn't realise how intelligent they are. They can sense fear in people. Like they get to know people and you can get a bond with a horse. A bond is big with a horse. You can get a real good bond with a horse.

Each of the participants in the course had their own assigned horse in the yard that they had responsibility for. Looking after a large animal such as a horse involves a lot of hard work and is a big responsibility, particularly so for young people who may not be

used to structure and routine due to the circumstances of their lives, including early-school leaving. Some of them commented on the level of work involved but it appeared that they were more than willing to accept this level of responsibility and in fact they seemed to thrive on it: “Yeah it gives me a great sense of responsibility... that I have to be responsible for looking after someone other than myself” (Wiz). “Like getting up in the mornings real early and being tired and mucking out stables tires you out even more and then you get onto the horse... and the horse is pulling you around the place... its not easy work but its worth it” (Glenn).

#### **4.4 Empathy**

Throughout the course of the research it became apparent that the participants were able to display empathy towards the horses. Empathy can be defined as the ability to feel or imagine another person’s emotional experience. The ability to empathize is an important component of social and emotional development and emerges within consistent and caring relationships over several years (McDonald & Messinger, 2015). It is suggested that the development of empathy is vital to the ‘healthy emotional and social functioning of youths’ (Thompson & Gullone, 2008, p.123). Conversely a lack of empathy has been linked to aggressive and criminal behaviour (Moskowitz, 2015). It has also been argued that empathy is a protective factor against aggression (Hastings, Zahn-Waxler, Robinson, Usher & Bridges, 2000). The young people’s passion for horses, and the sense of responsibility bestowed upon them through their participation in the Youthreach programme, appeared to be linked to supporting the development of empathy among the young people:

And ye start working with a horse and ye see like if ye don't feed it, it's gonna die and if ye don't let it out it can affect it mentally and if ye don't wash it it's dirty... so it starts teaching' ye to look after something other than yourself. Just like a human has a set routine, so does a horse. A lot of people will say, and me included, if ye teach your children to love horses they will never have money for drugs or alcohol” (Jack).

Many of the participants discussed how being around horses helped them to become more empathetic and allowed them to express affection and nurturing towards another living creature. This quote from Jack perfectly captures the idea of the development of empathy:

So you have to be strict, but you also need to understand how to do that without using too much force... but I suppose it depends on the horse itself. Like how old it is, what it's been through. Cos they are kind of just ... not exactly like humans, but they have got brains and they can be affected, like they do have memory of things

that happened to them. Like if you maltreat a horse they'll remember it and then they can turn on you.

Below, Glenn describes how he approaches physical contact with a horse and how a person needs to be tuned in to the emotional response of the horse in order to build up a trusting relationship with them:

Like if I'm touching his legs and he's kicking out, then I'll just rub him from his neck and all the way down his body and then down to his back legs and if he's moving his back legs loads then I know I have to take me time with him and just to let him know he can trust me.

The above quote illustrates the need to be gentle and aware of the horse's feelings in order to work effectively with them. The following excerpt from Ann's interview is a good example of how she needed to be in tune and empathic towards her horse in order to build up a strong and trusting relationship. Ann explained that by doing this she was able to reap the benefits of the relationship in terms of how the horse responded to her:

The way you speak is important. Like if you speak really deep toned and angrily to them they'll get scared. If you speak softly and just rub their necks if they're nervous and do all that then they'll start getting comfortable around you and then they'll be really easy to be around and when you ride them they'll be nice they wont mess around with you.

Some of the participants stated that they had an improved awareness of how their behaviour impacts on others, possibly a result of the mirroring capacity of horses. One of the participants explained that learning how to work with horses had enabled her to transfer skills acquired to other areas of her life. She explained that an understanding of horse behaviour and how she needed to conduct herself around horses resulted in her becoming more patient and tolerant with people: "I has a passion for horses and I came over here and I started horse riding and learning how to get the best out of a horse and as the years went on I became more patient with people because I had to be patient with the horses" (Ann). She went on to make this powerful statement, crediting her involvement with horses in the equine centre as having a life-changing, transformative effect:

And then I was able to take orders from people because I had to take orders from the people in the yard so I'm a lot more patient than I was a couple of years ago and I think if I hadn't ever really found horses I would have been a completely different person. I think I would have stayed the way I was a few years ago - like hot headed and everything. That's what I'm saying... the horses changed me

completely, even my mother says that I would have been a completely different person if I hadn't found my love for horses.

The development of empathy is important for young people when it comes to them moving away from anti-social/offending behaviour. For those who have difficulty empathising, perhaps because empathy was not demonstrated to them by their adult caregivers, by building a relationship with an animal, the beginnings of the development of empathy may be supported (Burgon, 2014). Whilst empirical research exploring the development of empathy in these groups is limited, some authors suggest that animals can help children in general develop empathy (Melson, 2005; Myers & Myers, 2007). During the interviews all the participants demonstrated how they had developed a sense of empathy, a critical construct given the inability of traditional therapy to fully facilitate this development (Rothe, Vega, Torres, Soler & Pazos, 2005). Empathy is also identified as offering a salient 'protective factor' against aggression (Hastings et al., 2000) and resultantly it could be argued to be an important factor in the desistance process.

#### **4.5 Self-esteem and Self-efficacy**

Another major theme to emerge during the research was to do with how working with horses and becoming a competent rider seemed to facilitate the development of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Within the resilience literature the development of self-esteem and self-confidence are considered to be of major importance, and necessary for both mental health and in raising self-efficacy in at-risk young people.

##### *4.5.1 Self-esteem*

Self-esteem and self-confidence are neatly summed up by Sempik, Aldridge and Becker who write:

Self-esteem refers to a general feeling of self-worth or self-value, while self-confidence is the feeling that an individual is likely to succeed in a task and had few hesitations or reservations about attempting it (2005, p.90).

Four of the five young people interviewed in the study either left early or were excluded from mainstream school. Low-level educational attainment and exclusion from school have negative implications for young people's self-esteem and self-confidence. Exclusion, in its broadest sense, can be defined as "Being shut out, fully or partially, from any of the social, economic, political or cultural systems which determine the



social integration of a person in society” (Macrae, Maguire & Milbourne 2003, p. 88-9). Put more simply, “exclusion implies rejection” (Kyriacou 2003, p.55). In the context of school as a community, it would be safe to assume that pupils who are either excluded or at risk of being excluded are likely to feel rejected and that they do not belong to the community. Additionally, other adverse factors linked to growing up in a socio-economically deprived area may have negatively impacted on the sample’s self-esteem and confidence.

The resilience literature also refers to ‘acts of helpfulness’ or ‘required helpfulness’ as protective factors (Werner, 1993). This is where assisting others may lead to positive benefits for a person. It has been suggested that acts of helpfulness can lead to an individual learning that they can effect positive change and have something valuable to offer (Katz, 1997). This idea of ‘required helpfulness’ resonates with the idea of generativity, which is put forward by Maruna (2001) as playing a significant role in the desistance process. Erikson (1963) first developed the concept of generativity and presented it as a psychosocial developmental challenge. McNeill & Maruna (2007) explain it simply as the act of ‘giving back’ to society. Other authors claim that through being responsible for the care of something or someone, growth in self-esteem can be attained (Myers & Myers, 2007). In his interview, Wiz explained how he was in the process of becoming a volunteer in the yard, in order to help out with the community riding lessons: “You know the way it’s called the Castletown Equine Centre? Well there’s lessons here for kids and disabled kids and I’ve been asking if I can go over there and help out even after I’ve done all me hours”. Some of these ‘acts of helpfulness’ benefits may be obtained from the caring and responsibility involved in looking after horses, and these benefits in turn transferred to other areas of psychosocial benefit to the individual (Burgon, 2014). As stated above, during the research it became apparent that, although looking after each of their horses was a difficult job which entailed a lot of responsibility, the majority of the young people seemed to enjoy this responsibility and spoke proudly of how much work was involved. The proud manner in which the young people explained how they looked after their horses indicated to the researcher that the tasks involved generated feelings of self-worth and self-esteem:

Your horse might need to be washed and groomed and cut and eh ye do it and ye spend a week doing it and eh ye see your product at the end of the week and ye say jaysus... ye trim it up and ye wash it today and cut it the next day and then ye put it into bed and ye wake up tomorrow and it's dirty and ye wash it again ye know... so it's a hard job (Jack).

#### 4.5.2 *Self-efficacy*

Having a sense of power or control of one's actions or future is known as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995) and is clearly linked to having a sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Another striking finding of the study was of the need for the young people to be physically assertive with the horses in order to get the best out of them. Horses have a natural mirroring capacity, whereby they provide accurate feedback to human body language and emotional energy through their behavioural reactions (Roberts, Bradbury & Williams, 2004). To achieve success with horses, participants must model behaviours that the horse will respond positively to, such as calm and confident leadership (Rashid, 2004). McCormick & McCormick (1997, p.64) claimed that working with horses leads participants to "...become more receptive to new ideas and behaviours". The horse teaches people the boundary between aggression and assertion (Burgon, 2015). The size of the horse is also significant, both in soliciting respect (Frewin & Gardiner, 2005) and building confidence as fear is overcome (Lentini & Knox, 2009). During Jack's interview he explained this quite succinctly:

I think horses can sense fear... I do think that horses pick you up on mistakes... like if they see a shortcut they will take it. So you have to be strict, but you also need to understand how to do that without using too much force.

In her interview, Ann described how horses can tune into body language and respond accordingly and about how important it is to be confident around horses in order to elicit the best response from them:

Like, the horses can pick up on body language... So if I went into a horse and I was really nervous and it was a bold horse... He might try and bite me... They don't like people being nervous. They'll start messing around with you so you need to keep your headstrong and your body language straight to show them that you're not afraid.

It has been suggested by some authors that acquiring a sense of self-efficacy and a feeling of control over one's life can improve resilience (Bandura, 1995; Katz, 1999; Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990). The resilience literature talks about how developing effective coping strategies and successfully overcoming obstacles and challenges can strengthen the ability to cope in the face of future difficulties (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000). The data collected in this study indicated that some of the participants

had gained a sense of self-efficacy from learning how to successfully control a horse, and by modifying their behaviours around the horses, which they then could potentially apply to other areas of their lives. Glenn speaks with pride about some of the things he has learned at the CEETC: “Well now that I've been jumping (Showjumping) on horses and I'm much more experienced with horses – they do be high enough jumps too. Where I used to just think I knew it all & then when I came in here I learned things I didn't know”. Jack describes how his confidence and expertise in relation to working with horses has grown so much:

I would've been nervous before but now it's completely cool... Going underneath the horse an' all and even washing private parts of the animal ye know I used to be afraid of touching things like that before but not anymore.

In his interview Glenn describes the sense of control and trust he has when riding his horse:

I just let the horse go, give him the rein and let him go. Like I don't have to worry about him taking off or running away on me or anything like that because I've been doing this with him since he was only a baby.

Some authors argue that engaging in activities that carry an element of risk is necessary in order to grow and develop self-esteem, self-confidence and self-efficacy (Ball, Gill & Spiegel, 2008). In an excerpt from Ann's interview she proudly describes how she overcame the challenge of riding a horse without a saddle in order to break the horse in:

I had actually never ridden bareback before and he was my first horse that I was on without a saddle. I wasn't used to it and it was really uncomfortable an all I didn't like it but I did it for him to break him in and help him to calm down. In a way I was learning from him and he was learning from me. So it took me nearly two months but then I actually really trained him and he'd listen to me voice, like if I said whoa he'd slow down. I can control him now with my voice.

This beautifully describes how her feelings of self-confidence and self-efficacy were developed through engaging in this risky process with her horse. Further, the bond and reciprocal relationship she had with her horse is evident from her description. Participating in pro-social activities and the successful completion of challenging tasks is consistently referred to in the resilience literature as being important in terms of providing protective factors for and building on the existing resources of at-risk young people (Rutter, 1985; Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990; Morgan, 2010). Desistance research by Maruna (2001) and LeBel, Burnett, Maruna & Bushway (2008) indicate that, among other factors, a belief in self-efficacy and the development of a pro-social identity seem to contribute positively to the desistance process. Four of the five

participants demonstrated that they had developed feelings of self-esteem and a belief in their self-efficacy as a direct result of working with horses, therefore, it could be argued that the development of these psychosocial competencies, through equine experiences, could be facilitating the process of desistance for these young people.

#### **4.6 Sense of Belonging/Connection**

Another theme that emerged after analysis was the sense of belonging and connection each of the young people felt to the centre and the workers at the centres and how important it was in their lives. Those who feel connected to others in a (non-criminal) community of some sort are more likely to stay away from crime (Farrall, 2004). Criminologists call this “social capital” – the amount of social support that someone has “in the bank” to draw upon. Social networks that support desistance include extended family, mutual aid associations, clubs, and cultural or religious groups (Farrall, 2004). In order to connect and feel a sense of belonging positive interpersonal relationships need to be developed. Burnett (2005) posits that desistance can only be understood within the context of human relationships and stress the importance of the relationship between workers and offenders. Further, McNeill (2011) argues that an important factor on the individual’s road to desistance is their own motivation to change for the better; maintaining their faith and hope; and the practitioners’ support role in maintaining that sense of hope. The participants in this study all spoke about their relationships with the instructors on the course and the way they felt more listened to and respected there in comparison to their experiences of mainstream school. This may be because of the smaller class sizes, which allows the instructors the luxury of having more time to devote to each student, or because of the approach the instructors use, which emphasises the strength of the relationship between the young person and the staff member and the importance of treating young people with respect, equality and dignity. Some of the things that participants valued about the service were how it had facilitated them to integrate more positively into the community and how much they enjoyed attending the Youthreach course as opposed to mainstream school:

It (the centre) was really helpful for me moving up here, it helped me make friends around here. Like, I knew people on me road but not outside of that. So when I came here I made more friends than just no me road.

Johnny explained how he used to find it difficult to get up in the mornings for school, but this was not an issue for him in relation to getting up for the equine programme:

I used to wake up in the mornings in the pit saying ah I've to go into this kip (school) now. Whereas I'll wake up now and still say I'm too tired to go in... but I want to come in here. Like you don't want to miss out on whatever is happening here. There's always something different going on in here... maybe a new horse is coming in. I look forward to coming in its not bad like its ten times better coming in here than it is coming into school... and ye have the craic with the lads here.

Here Ann describes the differences she sees between the Youthreach course and school:

The staff here are more patient and the classes are smaller. It's a lot different here. They don't nag at you, like if you're annoyed they'll leave you alone for about ten minutes and then they'll come back to you. Whereas when you're in school they just nag and nag and nag and say stop talking, stop saying ok, stop saying yes. You can't win in school.

All of the young people seemed to feel that they had a valued role in the centre and the sense of belonging and connection each young person felt to the centre was clear from each interview. The data suggests that positive relationships with the workers helped facilitate this feeling of belonging to something positive for the young people. Desistance researchers, Farrall (2002) and McNeill (2006), amongst others, have pointed to the need for meaningful, non-judgmental and proactive relationships between worker and client, which are founded on trust and consistency. Social control theory suggests that the strength and durability of an individual's bonds or commitments to conventional society inhibit social deviance (Hirschi, 1969). The strength of an individual's social bonds decreases the likelihood of anti-social or criminal behaviour. In other words, youth are less attracted to criminal behaviour when they are pro-socially involved with others, learning useful skills, being rewarded for using those skills, enjoying strong relationships and forming attachments, and earning the respect of their communities (Positiveyouthjustice.org, 2013).

#### **4.7 Hope and Opportunities**

Farrall and Calverley (2006) posit that the development and maintenance not just of motivation but also of hope are key factors to successful desistance. Considerable research now suggests that individuals who desist from crime usually are very motivated to change their lives and possess an adequate sense of hope and optimism (LeBel et al., 2008). By participating in the EAL programme, the young people were

exposed to opportunities to experience pro-social activities and to obtain recognised educational qualifications. Werner (1993) posits that benefits can be obtained by the experiencing of a wide range of pro-social activities. These benefits include the development of new social relationships and the gaining of new skills, competencies and self-confidence that can lead to the opening up of new possibilities and horizons, which may be especially limited for the young people participating in the programme. The data suggests that for the young people, their experiences on the project allowed them to envisage a brighter future for themselves than perhaps the vision they would have had as early school leavers prior to their participating on the course. All but one of the five participants talked about their plans for the future and a sense of hope and excitement permeated the descriptions of their plans:

And it makes you want better, cos you if you give it a month (here at the centre) then you start falling into a routine. Give it 6 months see then you're in a routine and then you're looking at what people are up to on the outside and you're saying Jesus, that's stupidity.

On successful completion of the Youthreach Programme at the CEETC participants can receive a QQI Level 4 award in Horsemanship, QQI Level 3 in Employability and QQI Level 4 in Information and Communication Technology. These awards can be used to progress onto PLC courses or can qualify the participants to work at a stables. In response to the question "Where do you see yourself in five years time?" Jack answered:

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of September I'm starting a mechanical engineering course in a PLC College and then I hope to go on to DIT to finish a degree in Bolton Street. I have it all planned out. I've been thinking about this over the last few months and in 5 years time hopefully I'll have my degree and be a qualified engineer... so in 10 years time hopefully I'll have my own home.

As stated above two of the participants had taken part in trials to become a jockey and were hopeful of being offered a place, although competition is fierce. Ann was one who went for trial. In this excerpt she informs the researcher of her career and life plans:

Yeah well I hope to get this course that I applied for to become a jockey and train for a year. You do a year course down there and then you can go on to be in different yards and they train you up themselves as well. Yeah, you work for them and then you start doing races and then you finish your racing career around the age of 40. So after retirement... I have me whole life planned out!!!... I want to work in a breeding yard or else I want to train young people to be jockeys...So that's what I want to do.

The importance of providing opportunities to individuals who have exhibited motivation in order to help facilitate desistance has been highlighted repeatedly through

empirical research (Giordano et al., 2002; Healy, 2010; McNeill, 2006). Having the opportunities to experience a wide range of pro-social experiences during adolescence allows a young person to practice and demonstrate competency and to embrace his or her responsibilities and value to the larger community (Coalition for Youth Justice, 2010).

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

The results from this study suggest that the relationships and experiences the participants had at the CEETC contributed to the development of psychosocial skills such as empathy, self-esteem and self-efficacy, sense of purpose and hope for the future. One of the central findings was the development of empathy in the young people. Through being responsible for their horse, learning how to effectively work with a horse, and getting to know their different personalities and characteristics, all of the participants appeared to be able to identify and empathise with them. Empathy is one of the characteristics fundamental to determining success in life, due to its importance with regards to the forming of positive working and personal relationships (Goleman, 1996). Resultantly, the presence of empathy in a person could be seen to be a key factor in the desistance process, as if a person is capable of putting themselves in someone else's shoes then they are less likely to continue to engage in offending behaviour which has the potential to negatively impact on others, either directly or indirectly.

It is suggested by the data collected in this study that all of the young people appeared to grow in confidence and ability through their experiences with the horses at CEETC. Confidence and self-esteem are seen as being key factors in terms of resilience and are related to feelings of self-efficacy, which are associated with positive outcomes in the desistance literature (Maruna, 2001). By participants learning that they could monitor and transform their own behaviour through displaying confident leadership to the horses in order to gain their co-operation, the young people were able to experience a feeling of control and the ability to positively influence something. Understanding that it is possible to effectively cope with, and successfully overcome, challenges through your own personal effort is known as self-efficacy and considered fundamental in terms of being enabled to have a sense of a positive future (Bandura, 1995). Having the ability to

be optimistic and see a positive future has also been mentioned as being important in terms of the desistance process (LeBel et al., 2008).

Another central finding of the study was the sense of belonging and connection the participants had to the centre and the workers at the centre. Social support and one's connection with others are key components of human development (Coalition for Youth Justice, 2010). The young people identified that they had built positive relationships with staff at the centre and that this facilitated a feeling of connection and belonging to the centre. Relationship building is central to engaging youth in positive roles and productive social activities. Furthermore, it forms a legitimate basis from which to support young people in reducing reoffending. All of the young people involved in the study spoke very positively about the workers at the CEETC, which was in stark contrast to their descriptions of their experiences of mainstream school. Services and supports to ensure positive social ties should be an important feature of programmes for youthful offenders and those at risk of becoming offenders. The study indicates that the CEETC has been successful in relation to the five young people participating on the EAL programme in terms of establishing solid relationships based on trust and continuity, which in turn allowed the young people to feel like they belonged to a positive community. Finally, by participating on the EAL programme it appeared that the young people gained some of the benefits argued to be obtained by the opening of positive opportunities (Werner, 1993). These benefits include the gaining of new skills and self-confidence that can lead to the opening up of new possibilities and a feeling of hope with regards to their future. As noted earlier, the presence of hope has been posited as playing a key role in the desistance process (Farrall & Calverley, 2006; LeBel et al., 2008).

It is evident from the data gathered, and the themes which emerged, that participation in the EAL programme at the CEETC had played a positive role in the lives of the five young people who were interviewed. The findings, although tentative due to the small sample size, conclude that the EAL programme does indeed facilitate the development of some of the psychosocial competencies which are required in order for a young person to successfully move away from offending behaviour. Many of the insights gleaned during this study echo the findings of other EAL studies in terms of the development of empathy, self-esteem and self-efficacy (Burgon, 2014;



Thehorsecourse.org., 2015; Trotter et al., 2008; Vidrine et al., 2002). These themes and those regarding the sense of belonging and connection, and hope and opportunities also resonate with much of the more recent desistance literature (McNeill et al., 2012, McNeill, 2006, Farrall & Calverley, 2006).

# CHAPTER FIVE

## 5.0 Conclusion And Recommendations

### 5.1 Conclusion

The idea for the study arose out of the researcher's extensive experience of working with vulnerable young people and the realisation that for some young people traditional interventions are ineffective, and for those few, the future is bleak. The need to be creative and to explore new ways of working with these young people in order for them to reach their potential and contribute positively to society is of vital importance. In seeking to explore youth justice interventions that are effective in working with hard to reach young people, the benefits to the lives of young people, their communities and society at large are multitude in that communities are safer, crime rates drop and criminal justice costs are lowered. Using a qualitative research approach, the study sought to explore five young people's experiences of participating on an EAL programme in order to establish whether the programme played a role in assisting them to divert from criminal pathways. Further, the study attempted to explore how the EAL programme facilitated the development of psychosocial competencies, practical skills and positive interpersonal relationships with practitioners, all of which are important factors in facilitating young people to move away from 'risky' and criminal behaviours?

The results from the study suggest that the relationships and experiences the young people had with the horses contributed to them gaining the psychosocial competencies identified in the desistance literature as being beneficial to the desistance process. The main finding from the study was that through the development of empathy, self-esteem and self-efficacy, a sense of belonging and connection, and the provision of positive opportunities and feelings of hope, the young people involved were supported in their transition away from a potential life of crime. Another important result to emerge from the study was is in relation to the power of using a strengths-based approach when working with at-risk young people. While the findings of the study support and echo the literature in relation to EAL and in turn resonate with the desistance literature, a

significant finding for the researcher that could have strong implications for future service design and delivery in this area, is the realisation that it may not be the specific intervention that is important, rather it may be the manner in which the service is delivered.

It was evident throughout the interviews that all of the young people felt supported, respected and happy to be a part of the centre. The CEETC's ethos could be considered as consistent with the Positive Youth Development framework insofar as it attempts to shift the focus of intervention away from a deficit-based emphasis on control, and toward a strengths-based emphasis on relationships and the development of existing resources. Strengths-based approaches such as Positive Youth Development have a growing evidence base (Jigsaw, nd) and the Irish Youth Justice Service should perhaps look to this approach with regards to future service provision. It remains to be seen whether a full shift will occur in the area of youth justice, from the deficits-based paradigm to a strengths-based approach, but there is growing discontent with the old paradigm. The Irish Youth Justice System, with its twin track welfare and justice model, views youthful offenders through either one of two lenses, either victim or villain. A new strengths-based paradigm would instead view youth as potential resources for their families and communities. Further, as the researcher has worked as a social care practitioner for many years with young people, it has become more and more apparent that building on young people's inherent resources and developing their skill sets is the key to empowerment and positive outcomes for them. The CEETC is unique in that it recognised and harnessed the keen horse heritage of the area in order to successfully engage the young people. The researcher is a firm believer that this strengths-based approach is vital to the successful engagement and positive development of young people and hopes the current study will contribute to the evidence base so that the paradigm shift away from a deficits based approach towards a strengths based approach can be moved a step forward.

So maybe it is the specific use of EAL that assists in diverting young people from criminal pathways, or perhaps it is the manner in which the EAL programme is delivered and the existence of the wrap around services at the CEETC, that is the key to the success of this programme. Unfortunately, due to the scope of this study, that question cannot be indubitably answered right now, however, it is the researcher's

opinion that the answer lies somewhere in between. This study highlights the importance of providing quality, evidence-informed interventions with a strengths-based ethos at their foundation. Finally, this study resulted in immense personal gratification for the researcher, as motivation and individual skills were incorporated to the forefront, which culminated in pride and passion, as well as an improvement in academic proficiency (Punch, 2006).

## **5.2 Recommendations**

- The researcher recommends that the Irish Youth Justice Service look to existing unique youth services such as the CEETC for inspiration with regards to service design and delivery.
- The Irish Youth Justice Service should look to the growing evidence-base regarding the use of strengths-based approaches such as PYD.
- The study will hopefully be of interest to practitioners in the field of youth work and social care who are looking for new and innovative ways to engage ‘hard to reach’ young people, for whom conventional education settings are difficult.
- The study may also be of interest to service providers and policy-makers in the area of youth justice, for example, the new National Children’s Detention Centre at Oberstown might use this information to assist them in drawing up plans in relation to appropriate service provision at the proposed site in Lusk, Co. Dublin.

## **5.3 Further Research Recommendations**

There is a dearth of research in Ireland that looks at successful youth justice interventions and the study attempted to lay the groundwork for future empirical research in this area. While there is a growing body of research from the UK and North America that suggests that equine-assisted activities are supportive in relation to working with at-risk adolescents, there has been no robust academic evaluations of such initiatives carried out to date in Ireland despite the fact that many young Irish people have a keen interest in horsemanship and are engaged in equine activities. The aim of the study was to lay the groundwork for more extensive and rigorous empirical testing of the interventions presented. It is the researcher’s opinion that the study presents some

preliminary and tentative findings that suggests that the EAL programme is beneficial in supporting young people to move away from criminal pathways by facilitating the development of psychosocial competencies, the building of positive relationships and the teaching of employable skills.

#### **6.4 Research Limitations and Anomalies**

Considering the depth and breadth of the subject matter, the small number of interviewees was flagged as a possible limitation, however considering the scope of this study and when one realises the quality of the data gathered through the interviews, this concern is somewhat assuaged. The validity and reliability of the study was further strengthened by the commonalities which emerged between the research findings and the existing literature.

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## **APPENDIX A:**

### **Interview Questions - July 2015**

**1. Can you tell me about how you came to be involved in the Equine Programme?**

Probes- What age did you leave school? What happened in school that resulted in you leaving? Can you tell me about how you became involved with the Garda Diversion Programme

What types of criminal activity/anti-social behaviour were you involved in? (Trying to ascertain what behaviours were problematic for the young people).

**2. In what ways is the Equine programme different than school?**

Probes - Did you enjoy it immediately or did it take a while to settle in? Class sizes? Less classroom based learning, more physical activity? Do you have any more examples of this??

**3. What type of things do you learn while participating on the Equine programme?**

Probes – Find out what practical skills they learnt. Do you think any of these things you learnt are helpful outside of the programme or will be helpful in the future? Probes around practical skills, relationships/building trust.

**4. Can you tell me about the rules in the yard and around the horses?**

Probes – Explore whether they had any issues about following to these rules. What happens if people are messing around the horses? What way do the horses react if people are shouting/angry/acting out? Explore the development of new skill/ability to follow rules/empathy/communication skills/ability to take direction from authority/conformity

**5. What did you enjoy most about the course?**

Probes – Relationship with Instructors, differences with classroom based learning, do you get on well with the instructors – how are they different to teachers.

**6. What do horses mean to you?**

Probes – Did you have experience with horses before starting the course? What kind of experience? (Trying to explore whether this was an interest /strength of theirs before they started the course – strengths-based perspective)

**7. Do you see any changes in yourself as a result of taking part in the programme?**

Probes – better concentration, more skills, more patience,

**8. Where do you see yourself in 5 years time?**

Probes - Would you like to work with horses in the future? Did you get a qualification? Can you tell me more about what this will qualify you to do? Would you have felt like this before doing the course – if no, then why not?

**Probing Questions:** Can you tell me a bit more about that?

You mentioned that.... How did you feel about that?

Could you say something more about that?

Have you experienced this yourself?

Is it correct that you feel that...?

## **APPENDIX B:**

### **Consent Letter – Parent/Guardian**

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Francisca O’Kelly and I am a student of the Masters of Criminology programme in Dublin Institute of Technology. I would like to meet with your child and hear their experiences of participating in the Equine Programme in order to gather information for a research project I am undertaking as part of my studies.

If you agree to your child participating in this study, he/she will be asked to give up some of their time to take part in an interview. This interview will focus on their experience of participating in the equine programme. The interview will be confidential and used only as part of the project outlined above. Your son/daughter can choose to stop participating at any time and they can choose not to answer any of the questions they are asked. Interviews will be recorded with your child’s permission so that I can accurately remember the contribution each individual has made. If you consent to your child’s participation, you will need to sign the form attached. If you have any questions now or at any stage during the study please do not hesitate to contact me. This research should give valuable insight into the experiences of young people participating on the programme and their participation is highly appreciated.

Francisca O’Kelly

Tel: [REDACTED] /Email: franciscaokelly@gmail.com

### **CONSENT FORM – PARENT/GUARDIAN**

I have read and understand the letter about this research and I am happy for my son/daughter to participate in this study:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## **APPENDIX C:**

### **Consent letter young person.**

Date:

Dear Participant,

My name is Francisca O'Kelly and I am a student of the Masters of Criminology programme in Dublin Institute of Technology. I would like to meet with your child and hear their experiences of participating in the Equine Programme in order to gather information for a research project I am undertaking as part of my studies.

If you agree to participate in this study, I would like to carry out an interview with you. This interview will focus on your experience of participating in the equine programme at the CEETC. The interview will be confidential and the information will only be used as part of the project outlined above. You can choose to stop participating at any time and you can choose not to answer any of the questions that are asked. Interviews will be recorded so that I can accurately remember the contribution that each individual has made.

If you consent to participation you will need to sign the form attached. If you have any questions now or at any stage during the study please do not hesitate to contact me. This research will hopefully give valuable insight into the experiences of young people participating and your participation is highly appreciated.

Kind Regards,

Francisca O'Kelly

Tel: [REDACTED]

Email: [franciscaokelly@gmail.com](mailto:franciscaokelly@gmail.com)

### **CONSENT FORM – YOUNG PERSON**

I have read and understand the letter about this research and I am happy to participate in the study:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX D:**

### **Information Letter to the COEETC:**

Re: Research Study: 'Equine Assisted Learning: An Exploratory Study of the Role an Equine-Assisted Learning Programme Plays in Diverting Young People from Criminal Pathways'.

To the Board of Management,

I am currently undertaking an MA in Criminology at the Department of Social Sciences with Dublin Institute of Technology. As part of my studies I am carrying out a research project. The title of the project is: 'An Exploratory Study of the Role an Equine-Assisted Learning Programme plays in Diverting Young People from Criminal Pathways'.

The study intends to focus on the experiences of young people participating in an Equine-Assisted Learning programme such as the one that is provided by your centre. The proposed topics for inclusion in the study are: reasons for entry into the programme, the experience of participating in the programme and the perceived benefits of the programme. I intend to conduct in-depth interviews with four young people, both male and female between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one years.

The focus of the interviews will be centred around the topics outlined above with particular emphasis on their personal experiences of the programme and how the young people feel it benefits them in relation to moving away from offending behaviour towards more socially acceptable behaviours. As a researcher and social care practitioner I will operate under a strict code of confidentiality at all times. The right to self-determination will be respected and to this end participation will be entirely voluntary and each participant will have the right to terminate the interview at any stage. The identity of each person will not be disclosed in the research and pseudonyms will be used.

I would be grateful if you could inform any of the young people who avail of your service and who fit the above criteria about the study. I am happy to come out to

speak with you or any potential participants prior to commencing the study. I would like to undertake the interviews and observation sessions during June and July 2015 and appreciate if you could give this letter your due consideration. I will contact you by telephone in the coming weeks. Alternatively please do not hesitate to contact me on 0861609364 if you require any further information.

Yours Sincerely,

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Francisca O'Kelly

**APPENDIX E:**

**Transcription – Interview Number 3 - Ann**

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