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Hansen, Tia G. B.; Glintborg, Chalotte

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Special with horses - A case study of Equine Assisted Pedagogy for two adolescents with multiple challenges

Tia G. B. Hansen & Charlotte Glintborg

Center for Human Animal Psychology (CHAP) &
Center for Developmental and Applied Psychological Science (CeDAPS)
Aalborg University
Denmark

INTRODUCTION

- Reviews find Equine Assisted Intervention (EAI) programs promising in the field of developmental disorders and disabilities (Maber-Aleksandrowicz, Avent & Hassiotis, 2016; Peters & Wood, 2017).
- Some children and adolescents have multiple profound challenges that prevent participation in standard programs.
- In such cases, long-term tailor-made Equine Assisted Pedagogy (EAP) may be relevant.
- The present case study explored a 5-year riding component of special education for two adolescents with developmental disabilities, profound hearing loss, and other diagnoses.

CASE

- The protagonists: Two 18-year-old men
- Both have developmental delays and profound attentional issues.
- One is diagnosed with infantile autism and the other with ADHD and several somatic issues.
- Both have hearing impairment and speak sign language.
- As part of the education schedule, they have attended "riding therapy" together for 5 years.
- The EAI was provided by a team of two; both have pedagogical degrees as well as riding instructor certification.

METHOD

- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with
 - the protagonists (via sign language interpreter),
 - their mothers,
 - their special education riding instructors, and
 - their special education primary teachers.
- Interviews were transcribed and cross-case thematic analysis applied.
- Socio-cultural psychology served as theoretical framework, specifically notions of scaffolding and narrative identity.



"He has a motoric outcome, he has developed in that respect" (mother)

"He could not feel - at least for the first two years, if he was sitting on the horse unbalanced so he was about to trip over and fall off, he did not notice." (riding instructor)
[Today, he masters trotting independently.]

"We help each other, when riding there..." (protagonist)

"He has developed a joy in doing things for others ... e.g., he has seen me making a toast for myself every morning, now he wants to do it for me" (primary teacher)

"they didn't know right-left or middle, we used that sign a lot ... [training] prepositions". (riding instructor)

"Their riding therapy also includes practical chores ... like sweeping in an organised way, starting in one corner and ending in another." (primary teacher)

"[early] we said 'now you do this' ... [but later] sequential tasks ... as they get better, you add a little to remember. Because, remembering the task until it is done is a challenge for them (riding instructor)

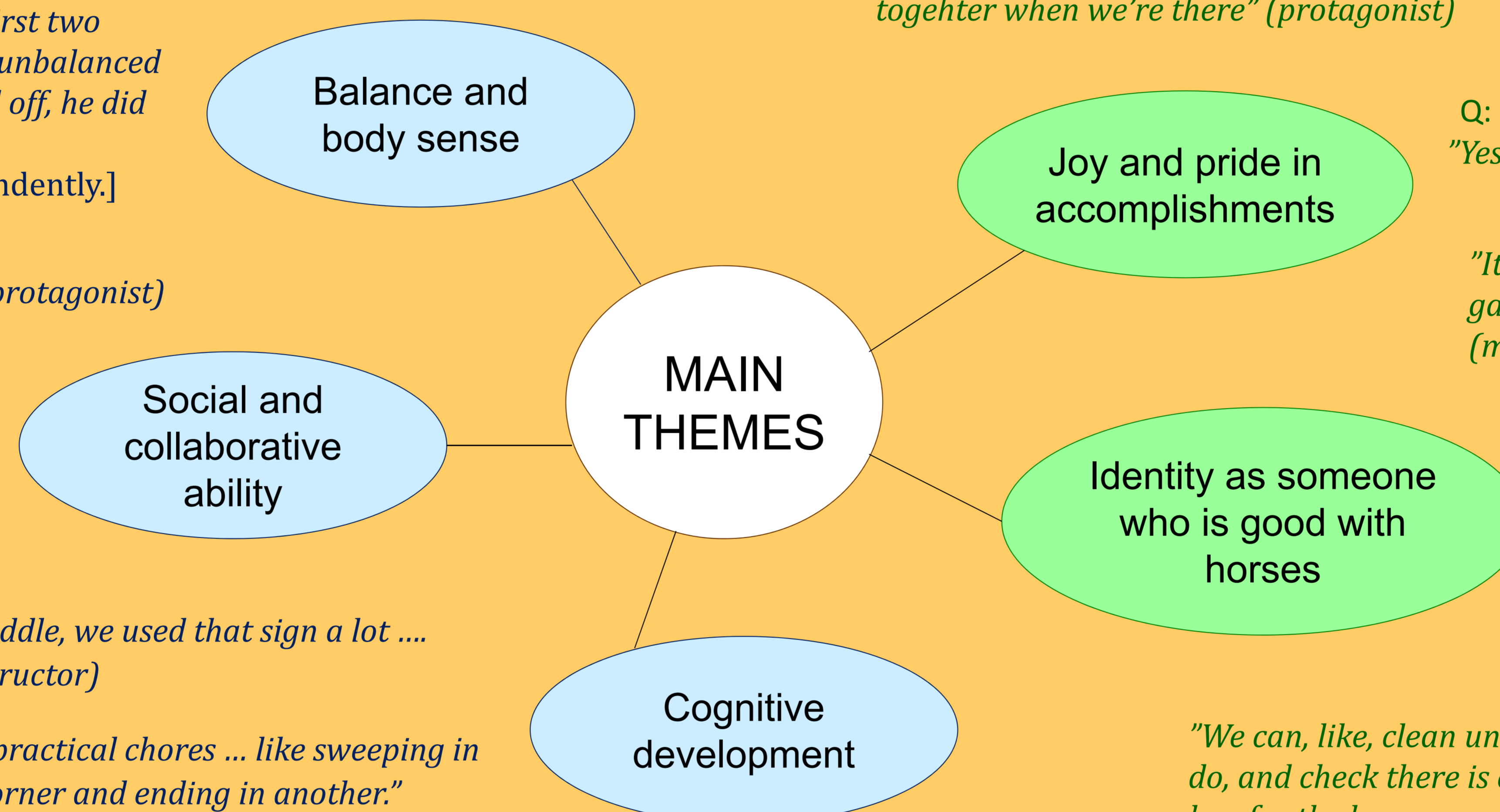
"We can laugh together - we laugh a lot together when we're there" (protagonist)

Q: Can you do more than when you began?
"Yes we are much better now!" (protagonist)

"It was a strong experience to see him gallop and see - all that pride in him." (mother)

"The interaction between [him] and the horses. ... I can just see that they are as one, and they understand each other, and [he] is met as the one he is by the horse..."(mother)

"We can, like, clean under the horses because we know what to do, and check there is enough food and, eh, make sure there is hay for the horses, you know, and put it on the floors and yes, we can do that ourselves" (protagonist)



THEORETICAL INTERPRETATION

Findings can be understood in the light of social cultural theory on tutoring (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976) and narrative self (Bruner, 1997).

Three themes (blue) corresponded to classical special education goals, with the riding and its contexts providing pedagogical means such as externalisation and continuous adjustment. The riding instructors' descriptions corresponded to the idea of scaffolding in tutoring, presented by Wood et al. (1976):

1. **Recruitment:** Get the learner interested in something in a relevant way. Being with the horses and learning to master riding was motivation.
2. **Reduction in degree of freedoms of the task:** Simplify the task, do what the learner cannot do themselves and let them fill out with what they can. From do-this-now to task sequence.
3. **Direction maintenance:** Keep on track and motivate for next step. You don't get off the horse mid-lesson + working towards riding diplomas.
4. **Marking critical features:** Emphasize task-relevant attributes, show what is lacking. Sweeping example.
5. **Frustration control:** Includes continuously attuning to the learner's level and giving tasks that are challenging but possible with guidance ("zone of proximal development").
6. **Demonstration:** Model the required behaviour by prototype, e.g., how to saddle up.

Two themes (green) may be understood as positive side effects and motivators. Horses as motivation has been described in many studies. Skills with horses was not a goal per se, but indications of self development was seen in most interviews, e.g., increased agency and now being someone who is "good with horses". Such an addition to protagonists' narrative identity could be an important implicit outcome (Bruner, 1997; Wanneberg, 2014).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

- When challenges are too severe to participate in standard Equine Assisted Intervention Programs, long-term Equine Assisted Pedagogy may be still be worthwhile.
- Instructors with a pedagogical background can create externalizations and continuous adjustments of horse-related tasks in ways that provide a scaffold for the learner's development.
- Gains may include augmented development in some of the areas known from standardized programs, and may also extend the explicit goals set, notably in terms of identity.

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Contact: tia@hum.aau.dk