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Care farming, learning and young people: An exploration into the possible contribution of care farming to young people's engagement with learning

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the qualitative findings from a study that explored the possible contribution of care farming to young people's engagement with learning. Firstly, the perceptions and experiences of young people accessing alternative curriculum on three care farms were gathered through a methodological approach underpinned by aspects of ethnography. Secondly, care farm providers and school support staff were consulted to provide a deeper understanding into why young people attend care farms, and to ascertain if they felt there were any perceived benefits to their learning.

Data were captured longitudinally during typical farming practices such as collecting eggs, sheep shearing and fencing to capture any naturally occurring evidence. Unstructured interviews, photo elicitation and semi-structured interviews were all triangulated with observational fieldwork notes.

Data yielded in this study found that care farms provide a nurturing and enabling learning environment for young people to self-discover and freedom from the humiliation and frustration experienced by some in the traditional schooling system. The most significant finding was the compelling interplay between the care farm context, the natural environment, and the values of informal education. The informal relational discourse, made evident through triangulated data, synergised with the nature-based pedagogy and the multitude of learning contexts on a care farm. This, therefore, provided a catalyst for young people to learn practically, socially and introspectively.

Keywords

Care farms; young people; nature based pedagogy; alternative curriculum; behavioural, emotional and social difficulties

Link to article

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Introduction: What is care farming?

Care farming is a developing concept and one that is gaining popularity across the globe. The objective of care farming is to provide physical and mental health improvements, socialisation and/or educational benefits through standard farming practices (SFG, 2022). Care farms are diverse and unique in their governance and daily operations. However, all care farms have an underpinning philosophy to use the natural environment to nurture positive health and wellbeing. Some, but not all, care farms offer alternative curriculum provision for young people whose needs are not being met within mainstream education (Bragg, 2022).

There are over 260 recognised care farms throughout the UK (SFG, 2022), and although this figure is increasing, care farming is still a developing practice and many of the features have been inspired by European models. Typically, individuals of any age experiencing poor mental health, with physical disabilities and a range of other additional needs, attend a care farm with an aspiration to improve their overall health and wellbeing (Elings, 2011). A study carried out by Bragg (2022) reviewed the delivery of care farms and recorded that the majority of care farms cater for individuals with mental ill-health (61%) and learning difficulties (62%), while 25% cater for young people excluded from school or accessing alternative curriculum.

The emerging field of research on care farms is growing (Hambidge, 2017; Bragg and Atkins, 2016) and research data analysed in existing studies offer an indication that care farms have specific qualities that may benefit participants. These include engaging in purposeful activities and being part of a social community based within a natural environment. The nexus between young people, alternative provision, and the potential of a nature-based pedagogy to provide rich learning opportunities was

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considered and informed the chosen methodological approach to explore the possible contribution of care farming to young people's engagement with learning.

Literature Review

Literature around the use of care farms is embryonic and is seemingly gaining momentum. This section draws upon the major contributions to this emerging field and the research that informed the present study. The concept of nature connection is reviewed first.

Whilst attending a care farm, participants can be both passively and actively involved with nature. Louv (2005: 51) suggests one reason for the emotional benefits of being in nature may be '...that green space fosters social interaction and thereby promotes social support'. He goes on to describe how teenagers could clear their minds, gain perspective and relax when in natural settings. Similarly, Richardson *et al*. (2019) in their work on nature connection propose that, when in nature, emotions of feeling happy and positive thoughts are experienced. With regards young people, in her work on care farms in the Netherlands, Elings (2011: 4) states that 'young people with difficulties show less behavioural problems after their stay on a farm'. From the literature reviewed, a care farm appears to be inexhaustible for new discoveries, and individuals attending the farms potentially make life-changing discoveries embracing the multi-sensory facets on their learning journey (Hambidge, 2017; Bragg and Atkins, 2016). Mills and McGregor (2014: 4) suggest 'all young people have the capacity to learn and to enjoy learning', yet due to the context, many do not.

Drawing upon wilderness therapy research, Pretty *et al*. (2013) advocate that access to green spaces and engagement with nature-based activities can be a catalyst for attitudinal modification and potential behavioural changes amongst young people who engage in criminal activities. They believe that nature can provide a distraction from negative everyday influences and offer an alternative lifestyle. Whilst Pretty *et al*. (2013) omit to reflect on young people who undertake risky behaviours in natural spaces, such as excessive alcohol consumption and gang-related activity, they

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nevertheless offer an insight into the potential impact of participating in structured activities in nature for young people at risk of social exclusion.

Elings (2011: 17) supports the findings of Pretty *et al.* in her work on the effects of care farms amongst young people with behavioural difficulties in the Netherlands. She suggests that being on a care farm supports troubled young people to 'get a handle on their lives again in a safe environment', where there is less aggression present than in a school or college facility. As one of the few researchers focusing solely on young people's experiences of care farming, Elings' work is highly significant for this study. Elings (2011: 18) observed that young people often need a purpose to stimulate a sense of responsibility. She suggests that a care farm has infinite opportunities for this in comparison to a classroom, where lessons are often too abstract. As she states, 'young people often need an environment that is 'unfinished', where they can fill in the blanks for themselves' and activities such as plant maintenance, animal husbandry and horticulture fulfil this. Moreover, Dutton and Chandra (2013: 43) suggested that natural surroundings can act as a co- therapist and allow individuals to 'just be'.

Corroborating elements of Elings'' (2011) work are the findings of Hambidge's (2017) study based on a care farm in England. Hambidge discovered through her work with young people that trusting relationships with the farm staff and mentors were an integral part of the care farm experience. This also supports Batsleer's (2008) notion of 'relationships' as central to the learning experience. Furthermore, Davies (2010: 2) states that working with young people informally is 'rooted in respect', taking into account their 'individual richness and complexities'.

Kettlewell *et al.* (2012) produced a research report on behalf of the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) focussed on 'engaging the disengaged' young people in schools. The report highlighted the successes and failures of interventions already in place within some institutions. A key finding was the wide use of alternative curriculum programmes with a vocational, work-based focus used to re-engage pupils and how successful they were at preventing some pupils from disengaging altogether from the education system. Additionally, some theorists, including Ball (2008), Illich (1971) and Slee (2011), argue that the discontent amongst several groups of young people does not start and end at the curriculum; rather it stems from deep inside the educational system itself and the unhelpful restrictive

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assessments, prescriptive curriculum and exam culture firmly embedded within its core. The metaphor of a robot was used by Endacott *et al*. (2015) when describing their experiences of teaching and the engrained robotic routines witnessed. Likewise, Coffield and Williamson (2011: 8) posit that the constant 'tinkering' and unnecessary focus on exam results by the Government has impacted significantly on the motivation of pupils and the quality of learning. Coffield and Williamson (2011) suggest a move away from 'exam factories' and target-driven schools to 'communities of discovery' where young people experience a more democratic education.

Furthermore, perhaps, young people referred to alternative curriculum programmes are by-products of the hyper-accountability that affects teachers and school leaders, resulting in the non-conforming pupils being moved off-site, off-rolled and having alternative provision 'imposed' on them 'rather than optional' (Hope, 2015: 110). This, therefore, fosters the perspective that alternative provision is a negative outcome, rather than one that nurtures those who desire an alternative to classroom-based learning. Similarly, Parffrey (1994) uses school exclusion statistics to strengthen her perspective that school cultures and practices are toxic for vulnerable young people whose needs are ignored by schools suggesting a system failure rather that an individual's failure to conform. During their investigations, the House of Commons Education Committee (2018: 3) acknowledged that alternative provision was viewed as a deficient mode of education, stating that '…alternative provision was the best outcome for some children we spoke to, but in order to access it children have to be branded a failure or excluded in the first place, rather than it being a positive choice'. This deficit model of education could also result in young people internalising failure and potentially viewing their lack of achievement in mainstream education as a reflection of their own skills and abilities.

Hope (2015: 111) questions whether the British education system is appropriate for all young people and suggests a 'deep-rooted change…so that all children have an equal chance of success within the mainstream sector'. Te Riele's (2009: 39) research synergises with the work of Hope, attributing the number of young people disengaged with mainstream school to 'out-dated' policies established on false assumptions of young people. She believes that policies should reflect how fragile and splintered life can be for many young people, promoting a pedagogy of hope and confidence in the

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system. Moreover, German (2010) proposed that rehabilitative measures are put in place for those young people facing exclusions rather than punitive procedures. Alternative provision may offer one of the rehabilitative strategies for those at risk, but provision must be viewed as such and not as a punitive measure.

When examining the effective characteristics of alternative curriculum programmes Martin and White (2012: 14) made a pertinent observation for this study, suggesting farms are a potential location. They state:

> The location of alternative provision can also contribute to its success. Provision delivered in work-based community or multi-purpose settings, for example, in farms, …provides a contrast to the traditional school or PRU setting. Many learners respond well to the additional elements these environments offer, including the opportunity to learn outside, in large open spaces.

Furthermore, through his work, Kraftl (2013) suggests that alternative learning spaces are created that are non-school-like in a deliberate attempt to promote teaching and learning. Supporting the work of Martin and White (2012), one of the alternative learning spaces advocated and reviewed by Kraftl (2013) is a care farm.

Early years education philosopher and pioneer Malaguzzi (interpreted by Smidt, 2013) believed that the environment itself is the third teacher and a partner in the learning process, alleging that the child and instructor are the first and second teachers. Smidt (2013) outlines how Malaguzzi based his educational philosophy on the ‘pedagogy of relationships’ rather than an ‘us and them’ approach often perpetuated in the traditional schooling system. Whilst Malaguzzi did not explore the impact of the environment in the later stages of education, it could be questioned whether the natural farming environment could be the third teacher in the alternative curriculum context

Methodology

The research aim was to explore the possible contribution of care farming to young people’s engagement with learning. After a review of the relevant literature and methodological frameworks, the underpinning research questions were established:

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1. How do young people and care farm providers articulate the reasons why young people attend care farms in England?
2. What are young people's perceptions of their educational experiences, both on care farms and as part of formal education?
3. How and in what ways do young people learn on care farms in England, if at all?

Choosing an appropriate methodology involved taking into account a range of factors, but most importantly putting the young people and care farm providers at the heart of the research. Ascertaining the views and lived social realities of young people was central to the study and therefore a holistic methodology was adopted that saw them as active agents and co-producers of knowledge within the inquiry process (Bryman, 1988). In this way, the aim was to generate accounts that avoided a simplistic and reductive interpretation of what it was like to participate on a care farm. Through the collection and interpretation of detailed accounts, the study endeavoured to 'see through the eyes of…the people who are being studied' (Bryman, 1988: 61). Furthermore, James (2001) explains that one of the reasons why ethnography has been used so readily by youth researchers is the fact that it allows young people to be perceived as social actors in their own right and worthy participants. Through observing and working alongside young people and staff within a care farming environment over a period of time, an understanding of shared, common experiences of the group was gained.

An interpretivist paradigm was chosen as the harvesting of data was over a year-long period and provided an understanding of social behaviour in a given context. Contrasting with a positivist approach, this research acknowledges that there will be subjectivity and a lack of neutrality. However, taking this into account throughout the research process and understanding of roles within the research contribute to critical reflexivity. Banaji *et al.* (2018: 100) suggest that reflexivity is '…considered a pivotal element of ethnography' and advise that it is acknowledged '…that neither researcher nor researched are empty vessels, but rather subjects with their own agendas and unequal positions'. Onoing reflexivity in a systematic and thoughtful way confronts potential bias and pre-conceived views that may be held by the researcher, thus strengthening the objective interpretation of what is observed during

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the data collection period. This will lead to greater understanding of the social world experienced by the young people and subsequently their lived reality.

The main research method was that of unstructured interviews to generate natural accounts and perceptions of those central to the study (James, 2011). In addition, semi-structured interviews, participant observations and photo elicitation were used as tools to facilitate discussion and capture the thoughts and experiences of all the participants.

Ethical considerations

Groundwater-Smith *et al*. (2015: 33) recommend that when undertaking research with young people, researchers ‘should be alert to issues of manipulation, coercion and their relation to power and authority’. Similarly, Bradford and Cullen (2012: 50) suggest that ‘research that engages with young people’s narratives and lived experiences can be overpowering and emotionally intrusive’. This is of central importance to the study in hand as the young people may have had negative experiences of authority in their educational history, and preconceived views of teachers may have manifested themselves. Bucknall (2014: 80) uses the phrase ‘otherness’ to describe the inevitable power differentials between an adult researcher and their young participants, suggesting that the researcher considers how they can best overcome the ‘otherness’ through building a rapport or familiarity with the participants. She goes on to state that it is the responsibility of the researcher to try to meet the young people on their own terms (*ibid*). To mitigate any power differentials, time was spent alongside the young people on the care farm before beginning data collection in the hope that safe conditions were created for them to express themselves honestly, in their language, on their terms and without fear of being judged.

The dynamics of consent can be complex and further compounded by the potential vulnerability of the young people who are no longer accessing mainstream school. Assigned to a social category of non-conformity, the struggles that a parent or carer may have experienced cannot be underestimated. Groundwater-Smith *et al*. (2015: 79) highlight that parents/ carers ‘may see the research as another unwelcome welfare intervention that exposes them to others judgements’ which could lead to the eventual decision for their child not to participate in the research.

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The British Education Research Association's (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018) were followed throughout the study. Informed consent applied to all participants and stakeholders involved in the research process and therefore due attention was given ensuring that all understood the research trajectory (Mason, 2002). In this respect, and by acknowledging the requirement for informed consent and anonymity, all participants were given a participant information sheet and asked to sign a consent form. In the case of young people, their parent(s), carer(s) or intermediaries were also asked to complete a consent form.

Throughout the research process the anonymity of all participants and organisations was upheld. As young people and care farm providers were sharing their personal experiences and sensitive thoughts, it was paramount that confidentiality was observed at all points in the research. Fetterman (2010: 146) describes this sensitivity as probing 'beyond the facade of normal human interaction'. To support this, pseudonyms were used throughout, and the names of farms were altered to avoid any participant being identified. Using pseudonyms is a simple way of 'disguising the identity of an individual and protect them from potential harm' (Fetterman, 2010: 147).

Findings and discussion

The primary aim of this study was to explore the possible contribution care farming may have on young people's engagement with learning. Underpinned by an ethnographic methodology, 12 young people aged between 13 and 16 years, 2 school staff and 7 care farm staff were observed, interviewed and joined in their daily activities to capture their lived realities on three care farms.

Material from all participants and the observational data were systematically analysed; not to generalise key points, but rather to combine evidence in order to identify similarities and differences to construct a rich understanding of how a care farm may contribute to a young person's engagement with learning. Selected quotations have been presented as verbatim for authenticity purposes and to protect the voices of participants.

The most significant finding was the compelling interplay between four elements. The four elements were:

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1. The young person
2. The other participants
3. The informal relational discourse harnessed by the care farm staff
4. The nature-based learning contexts available on the care farm.

The informal relational discourse, evident through triangulated data, synergised with the nature-based pedagogy and learning contexts on a care farm. The individual young people and other farm participants were immersed within this symbolic experience. It is argued, therefore, that this synergy provides a catalyst for young people to learn practically, socially and introspectively. This key claim forms the basis of the following discussion.

Experiences of mainstream education and on a care farm

Findings from all participants across the three sites indicated that for many young people their experiences of mainstream education were demanding and often traumatic. Phrases such as “couldn’t cope”, “beyond terrible” and “struggling” were evident in the young people’s responses. Similarly, responses from the school staff and care farm staff included the phrases “school is difficult for these boys”, “couldn’t cope with how busy it was” and “pressures of mainstream”. These findings concur with a range of literature around the restricting regimes fostered within school environments and how these can impact negatively on young people. Within this study, the voices of participants corroborated this. Ball (2008), Illich (1971) and Slee (2011) attribute the discontent amongst some young people with the school system to the astringent assessment and examination culture rather than a cultural emphasis on flexible learning opportunities. An interview with a farm manager in this study revealed that examinations are setting young people “up to fail”. Coffield and Williamson (2011) support this response suggesting the “exam factory” culture is victimising and excluding. Parffrey (1994) reinforces this when she suggests that the school assessment cultures and practices are toxic for vulnerable young people.

Self-exclusion

The findings of this study revealed that the coping strategy adopted by many of the young people experiencing humiliation and pain in the classroom was to self-exclude.

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By misbehaving (refusing to do the work), being disruptive (making sex noises) and sometimes being physically violent in the classroom (assaulting a teacher), the young people were removed from the classroom and subsequently avoided the work that was causing them anxiety and stress. The self-exclusion strategy described by young people was emphasized and reinforced through the narratives of the care farm staff and school support staff. One farm manager believed that when the work becomes difficult some young people "kick off and then it's all about the bad behaviour and getting excluded". Another example of dealing with the stress within a classroom was screaming, as a school support staff member shared: "…as soon as he goes to put pen to paper, he just screams". During an unstructured conversation, I asked the young man why he screams in the school classroom. He replied, "what's the point in being quiet and nobody hears you, then nobody understands?". This was a powerful statement that conveyed his frustration. Parffrey (1994: 108) attributes this frustration and the desire to self-exclude documented by many of the young people to a 'system failure'. She suggests that the school system itself has failed the young people rather than the resulting behaviour being a failure to conform. Data yielded in this study found that care farms provide a nurturing and enabling learning environment for young people to self-discover and be free from the humiliation and frustration experienced, by some, in the traditional schooling system.

Robots and dreams

All participants – young people, care farm providers and school staff – made reference to the restrictive curriculum and lack of practical learning opportunities within the mainstream education system. Data revealed that care farms offered numerous opportunities for engaging in meaningful practical activities which were predominantly based on young people's interests. It became apparent during the course of data collection that all three care farms did not have a prescribed curriculum driving the provision; instead, the needs of the natural environment and the animals often dictate the daily tasks.

Kieran described his experience in mainstream school as "robotic", suggesting that school pupils were robots having to perform well at the subjects the school and government decide needs to be taught: "to fit into school you've got to be a robot". Kieran became quite angry when using this metaphor and shared how he was not a

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robot. The metaphor of a robot was also used by Endacott *et al*. (2015) when describing their experiences of schooling and aligns with the work of Illich (1971) who believed that schools reinforce government ideology and impose regimes, for example timetables and standardised assessments, upon young people.

The preference to be outdoors on a farm setting rather than in a school environment was raised by most participants across the three sites. Luke shared how he likes “being outdoors instead of being in a classroom”, describing how he feels “free” and “happy” outdoors. The emotions of feeling happy and experiencing positive thoughts when in nature is documented by Richardson *et al*. (2019) in their work on nature connection. They stated that ‘attachment to nature is essential to nature connectedness’ (Richardson *et al.,* 2019: 3). In the present study Harry declared he was an “outdoor person not an indoor person”, and similarly, Freya explained that she wants to “learn outside” rather than attending school where ‘they…shove you in a classroom”. Luke compared his experiences in a school classroom to feeling “like I’m being choked to death inside”. The freedom and open-air nature of care farms was a clear driver for young people’s desire to attend and participate. In their study examining alternative curriculum locations Martin and White (2012) suggested the location of alternative provision contributes to the success of the programmes. Supporting the preferences shared by the young people in this study, Martin and White (2012) found that having the opportunity to learn outside and in large open spaces were elements of alternative curriculum programmes learners responded well to. Expanding the use of care farms for alternative curriculum provision supports access to green spaces and the natural environment for young people who prefer an outdoor environment in which to learn (Kraftl, 2013).

Correspondingly in her work, Elings (2011: 18) stated that “being outside of a destructive environment” and “having the opportunity to be creative in the farming environment, moving away from the abstract to the practical” were crucial aspects of a care farm when working positively with young people. Clearly, the meaningful practical activities undertaken on a care farm were purposeful for the small group of young people in Elings’ research and is securely maintained through this study across the three sites. Based on the findings of this study, it is proposed that the practical activities on a care farm offer a positive alternative to the restrictive curriculum

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imposed on many young people in mainstream school (Ball, 2008). The care farms in this study offered a multitude of purposeful opportunities for fulfilling dreams and eliminating robotism (Endacott *et al*., 2015).

Relationships

A persistent theme that emerged from the data was the notion of relationships. Relationships were complex and nuanced, yet were alluded to by all participants within numerous contexts.

Relationships with care farm staff

Findings indicated that relationships between staff and young people on the three care farms were based on mutual respect. Young people described the reason why they engage so positively at the care farm but not in school: "*because you respect us…people at school don't"* and "*you can talk without getting judged on what you say*". This style was corroborated by one care farm manager who recognised that her team were all qualified teachers, yet she described the approach on the care farm as "*a little bit more relaxed*" than mainstream school. Similarly, in her study, te Reile (2009) concluded that the success of many alternative curriculum providers at engaging with disaffected young people included a culture of respect, security and relationships of trust. The non-judgemental and dialogical style of communication described by the young people and staff bore resemblance to the informal pedagogy evident through the youth work values of equity, respect and participation (Batsleer, 2008). Davies (2010: 2) states that informal work with young people is 'rooted in respect' taking into account their 'individual richness and complexities'; something happening on care farms that became evident when observing and collating responses from the participants in this study. The relational approach of youth work put forward by Davies (2010), was described by a care farm manager when he suggested that his approach is "to be patient with them and trying to be in their place really". Max portrayed the care farm staff team as "like another family", explaining how he felt he could "talk to someone…I can let everything out…the members of staff are unreal…they listen to you*"*.

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During the course of the study there were times when something much more than a mutual respect and relational approach between the care farmer and young people was apparent, something that felt imperceptible yet highly significant. Through the data, a passion and professional affection for the young people, who were often very complex, was witnessed emerging from many of the care farm staff. One care farmer described the purpose of young people attending a care farm: "well, I think young people are precious, they're the future of the planet". This is a dominant statement that concurs with observational data documented whilst working with the staff and young people across all care farm research sites. This is where the interplay of the farm location, the evident mutual respect between the young people and staff team alongside the compassion of the staff, makes the provision so unique. Significantly, these three distinctive factors synergised with each other. Findings imply there is a wider discourse emerging which takes place beyond individual young people and staff and moves away from a vortex of failure to a haven of accomplishment.

Relationships with other care farm participants

A further relationship dynamic that emerged from the findings of this study was the associations between care farm participants. Elings (2011: 18) found that young people on a care farm present with less aggression than in a 'destructive' school environment. However, some antagonism was evident through the observations and interview data generated in this study, which questions the fulfilment of all relationships. Nevertheless, the instances of tension between the young people were momentary. In contrast, relationships between the different client groups appeared to be harmonious. At two care farm sites client groups were mixed allowing for greater socialisation amongst groups and broader learning opportunities. Empirical data corroborated through interview data confirmed that the care farm environment offered young people the opportunity to build positive relationships and empathy with those often misunderstood. Referring to the combination of client groups, one manager commented about the learning this generates: "*everyone mixes and mingles on the farm…so we're all learning different skills off each other all the time"*. Additionally, another manager stated that "*young people are given the chance to interact with others*". Furthermore, a third care farm manager shared her experiences of regularly seeing "*young people interacting exceptionally well with our adult care farm clients*".

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Responses from participants correlate with the work of Elings (2011: 43) who suggests that care farms are social communities where 'people complement each other and are a valuable resource for one another'. One of the school support staff shared in her interview that she felt young people developed "*empathy for others*" whilst attending the care farm, giving them "*an insight into another world*". The data triangulated from the young people, care farm staff and school staff, builds up a convincing picture of young people learning from new experiences and interactions with others on the care farms. The social benefits of being in green spaces such as a care farm were documented in Louv's (2005: 51) work when he suggested that the natural environment 'fosters social interaction'. Furthermore, Hambidge (2017: 230) coined the phrase 'social facilitator' to describe the natural environment and what she had observed amongst the young people with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.

Relationships with animals

Emerging from the data derived from this study is the potential of animals to engage young people and to create feelings of safety, calmness, and love. This was a common feature across all farm sites systematically studied. Many of the young people, when asked to capture somewhere on the farm where they felt safe and/or happy, images of the animals were taken. Whilst taking a photograph of a farm bird, Luke shared how he felt happy when near it and described how he liked talking to her. Similarly, on a different site, Max shared how when he takes the pony for a walk, he feels he can talk to him without fear of judgement: "it sounds daft but like I talk to him". Furthermore, five you+ng people across the three sites took images of the farm horses, remarking that they felt happy and safe when they were nearby. Max believed he had "learnt trust" through his interactions with the ponies. In addition, Max described his feelings when caring for the chickens: "I feel loved" and made reference to one particular chicken as the "first friend" he had met. Through her doctoral research with adult participants on a care farm, Bragg (2014: 133) reported that 'having contact with farm animals' was one of the aspects enjoyed the most. Bragg's findings corroborate with those of this study, and although her research involved an older age group, the enjoyment and pleasure derived from the animals on all the care farms studied appears evident regardless of age. These data, therefore, reinforce the argument that

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animals on a care farm are an effective channel through which young people can express themselves in a safe and calming manner.

Learning introspectively

A theme that became apparent during the analysis of data was the numerous references to young people learning about themselves whilst attending a care farm, and feeling free to express their individuality. The term 'introspection' has been used to capture this. The care farms created interpersonal affective atmospheres where feelings of vulnerability were diminished and, through positive interactions, young people could start to rebuild their self-worth. Young people reported replacing negative feelings/experiences with positive feelings/experiences on the care farm. This, therefore, reinforces the argument that care farms are vehicles to aid self-discovery amongst young people who have experienced personal low self-esteem and self-worth.

During his research based in Finland, Louv (2005: 51) discovered that teenagers could clear their minds, gain perspective and relax when in natural settings, and based on the participants accounts, it is suggested that this is applicable to the care farm setting. This, of course, is complex and nuanced as toxic experiences may feature elsewhere in their lives, but while attending the care farm, young people have the opportunity to gain perspective, challenge destructive life trajectories and potentially develop new aspirations. Discussing the turbulent behaviour and lives of many young people engaging in alternative curriculum on the care farm, one manager suggested that whilst on the farm some, but not all, "start to put down roots and find a purpose in life". Harry concurred with this when he shared that he attended the care farm to help him move away from his anarchic life and to "get a job where I can have a farm". Pretty et al. (2013: 184) believed that natural green spaces can 'foster behavioural change' and act as a catalyst for attitudinal modification. The catalyst in this study was the care farm environment alongside the staff team who facilitated the reflective space for the young people.

The freedom to self-identify was referred to by care farm managers on two different sites. The care farms were described as places where young people develop "self-belief" and "learn it's ok to be you". Similarly, Dutton and Chandra (2013: 43)

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suggested that natural surroundings can act as a co-therapist and allow individuals to 'just be'. Furthermore, Smidt (2013), reflecting on the work of Malaguzzi (2012), contended that the environment was the third teacher when working with young children. However, rather than being seen as three distinct 'teachers', evidence generated in this study on care farms moves towards a notion of 'co-creation of learning' between four areas. The notion of co-therapist and the significance of the natural environment to facilitate learning amongst young people aged between 13 to 16 years was apparent through empirical data in this study, but there was another layer that was evident, yet not captured in the existing literature. The informal relational discourse harnessed by the staff, young people and other farm participants, synergised with the nature-based pedagogy and learning contexts on a care farm. This synergy of four elements provided a catalyst for young people to learn practically, socially and introspectively. The diagram that follows aims to capture this and illustrates the key findings of this study:

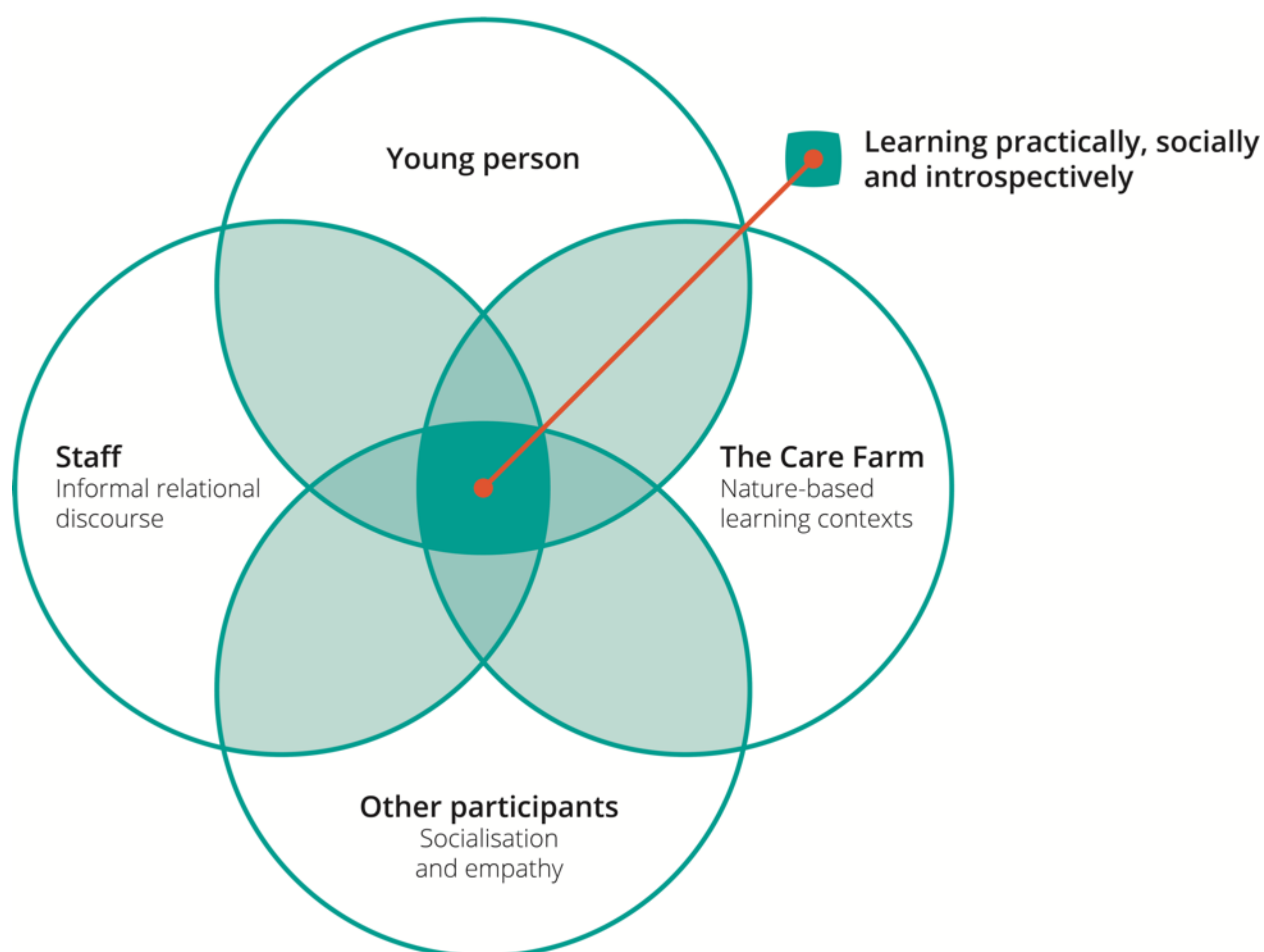

Figure 1: Intersection of learning on a care farm

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The diagram highlights the intersection between the four key features that emerged from this study and demonstrates the originality of the findings. This section has discussed aspects emerging from the interplay and suggests the richness of this potion counters the traditional classroom-based model of education. Moreover, it offers an alternative mode of schooling to allow young people who find traditional models of instruction traumatic, the opportunity to thrive.

Conclusion

The main research findings evidenced in this paper can be summarised as below:

- Care farms provide a nurturing and enabling learning environment for young people to self-discover and be free from the humiliation and frustration experienced, by some, in the traditional schooling system.
- Animals on a care farm are an effective channel through which young people can express themselves in a safe and calming manner.
- The informal relational discourse evidenced through interactions with the staff, young people and other participants, synergises with the nature-based pedagogy and learning contexts on a care farm, providing a catalyst for young people to learn practically, socially and introspectively.

Young people across the study sites shared their frustrations with the restrictiveness of the school curriculum and the constraining nature of school structures, detailing the desired outdoor environment in which they preferred to learn. Narratives from the young people evidenced aspects of humiliation, shame and in some cases physical pain, that they had experienced whilst attending a mainstream school. This deficit position often resulted in their decision to self-exclude and face a formal exclusion. The latter series of toxic experiences demonstrates the requirement for alternative models of education to meet the needs of those who do not conform to the enforced curriculum and assessment regime apparent in the mainstream school system. The participants had clear and consistent views that identified care farms as an alternative model of education where young people thrive and one that creates a sense of freedom and independence.

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Realising the potential of care farming for alternative provision could also have an impact on how alternative curriculum is perceived by the education community. There is a harmful stigma attributed to young people who access alternative provision, rather than one that nurtures those who crave alternatives to traditional classroom-based environments (Hope, 2015). Participants in this study shared how they felt “pride” and a “sense of achievement” when they had been on the care farm. This counteracts the deficit position and stigmatisation imposed on them through the exclusion processes the young people had all experienced at some point in their education journey. German (2000) proposed that rehabilitative measures are put in place for those young people facing exclusions rather than punitive procedures. The rehabilitative properties evident on a care farm have been well documented in this study, and in line with German’s proposal, the provision must be viewed as such and not a punitive measure. Mills and McGregor (2014: 4) put forward the notion that ‘all young people have the capacity to learn and to enjoy learning’ and this study has argued that a care farm allows young people to reveal their capacity to learn and to enjoy learning in a natural environment. The study adds to the growing evidence for a cultural shift and perception change towards alternative curriculum provision, specifically provision based within a farm environment.

The significant findings of this study have implications not only for how care farms are perceived as invaluable alternative curriculum providers, but also for the mental health and wellbeing of many young people who continue to suffocate in the mainstream schooling system. Realising the potential of care farms to contribute to young people’s engagement with learning is critical to enabling many young people to transform their lives away from a vortex of failure to a haven of accomplishment and pride.

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