

What does it mean to young people to be part of a care farm?
**An evaluation of a care farm intervention for young people with behavioural,
emotional and social difficulties.**

Abstract of the study:

Background: There are currently 808,000 young people (aged 16 to 24) in the United Kingdom (UK) who are Not in Education, Employment and Training (NEET). One potential indicator of becoming NEET is exhibiting behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESDs). BESD is associated with a variety of increased and challenging educational needs. Alternative educational options are scarce. This study evaluates the impact of a care farm, aiming to improve mental and social health of young people with BESDs from low-socioeconomic backgrounds at risk of becoming NEET.

Methods: A longitudinal mixed-method study was conducted which explored the experiences and perceptions of young people attending a care farm. Data were longitudinally captured using a validated questionnaire pack, semi-structured interviews at baseline, 6 months and 9 months, triangulated with observational fieldwork. The RE-AIM (Reach, Effectiveness, Adoption, Implementation, and Maintenance) evaluation framework was used to contextualise findings.

Results:

1. Reach: The evaluation of what factors supported access to attending the care farm confirmed participants from a dysfunctional home environment required additional support to attend the care farm and needed continued support during the school holidays by attending the farm to reduce set-backs in progress
2. Effectiveness: The farm was perceived as an inclusive environment, which resulted in a significant reduction in self-reported mental health risks (stress, depression, anxiety) and behavioural regulation difficulties; improved social relationships and coping; increased contact with nature and the natural environment; improved life and work skills; and, promoted re-engagement with learning and less disaffection with society.
3. Adoption: The care farm model and the layout of the physical farm environment can be replicated at other care farm sites to assist with the delivery of the intervention. Barriers were identified as funding on a national and local level.

4. Implementation: The process and mechanism of the care farm model allowed a 'sense of belonging' and 'trust' to be developed between the participants and the farm staff during the intervention.

5. Maintenance: The main barrier to sustainability was service user access to the care farm due to the lack of social care funding and the limited knowledge of health and social care commissioners about the benefits of care farms leading to limited social prescribing to the service.

Conclusions: The care farm initiative provided an alternative to traditional classroom based learning for the participating young people. This model of the care farm environment is conducive for young people to build key social, life and relationship skills, whilst enhancing their chances of remaining in education, employment or training.

Overview of data which related to young people and their experience and engagement with school

RQ2: How does this care farm model impact on the physical, mental and social development of pre-NEET young people with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties?

Re-engagement with school (Learning component of the care farm model)

Observational and interview data at the start of the intervention indicated that most participants in the study were disengaged from school. Participants held a very negative view of the school environment.

‘But, then it varies on like the environment you are in, like, at school you can have a dick around, you can laugh, and that’s only a joke’ (Arthur: baseline).

‘I refuse to do work at school if I don’t want to do it’ (Cecil: baseline).

Previous research findings indicated that if an individual has doubts or lacks self-confidence about their levels of achievement then they would be at risk of poor educational performance and outcomes (Ames, 1992; Beilock & Willingham, 2014; Hirvonen et al., 2012; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Indeed, in this current study, it was observed that doubting oneself was a contributing factor as to why participants were underachieving and disengaged from school.

The care farm intervention's physical and educational set up aimed to facilitate personal development, hence increasing participants' confidence in their abilities and skills. Consequently, the intervention also aimed to reduce participants' fears and doubts associated with school attainments and exam performances. Previous research suggests that when an individual believes they can be successful by learning new skills, they typically prove themselves right because they are determined to do so (Deci et al, 1994, Wigfield & Eccles, 2000; Beilock & Willingham, 2014). However, if an individual is apprehensive about their skills then they can become anxious; produce poor performance and will under-achieve (Beilock & Willingham, 2014; Wigfield & Meece, 1988). Similar to previous findings, at the start of this study, many participants were observed to be apprehensive and demotivated when they were asked to tackle a specific task (Beilock & Willingham, 2014; Hirvonen et al., 2012; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). This can explain why participants may have lacked interest in school and why they have been avoiding and displaying disruptive behaviours, for which they were often excluded from formal education.

Skill-learning:

The farmer drew on her own personal experience from growing up as a farmer's daughter to realise that skill-learning was an essential part of participants' personal development and was an integral component for the effectiveness of the care farm intervention. She and her staff worked towards getting every single young person to leave the farm with professional farming skills, which will give them the opportunity to gain further professional and formal qualifications.

The interview with the farmer revealed she knew that if participants did not re-engage with the formal educational system, they would be left behind and probably continue to have a bleak life course. Therefore, she focused her intervention to reduce the risks of individuals becoming NEET. It was not likely that participants would gain higher grade GCSE qualifications, so the decision to focus on practical and career enhancing skills seem to have suited this population. Engagement with a working farm was instrumental to help them to secure a place at college, an apprenticeship and/or a job. There is a strong track record of participants leaving the farm with a vocational qualification, even when they achieved very little at school.

‘For some of the children that are dyslexic it's the fact that they're never going to be academic. They're very, very clever, and that is so

frustrating they're so clever, but they're never going to be the best in an academic writing situation. But they can be the best at planning, problem solving and making something wonderful and that's what we try to discover and nurture' (Farmer).

Consequently, the intervention is a structured hands-on programme implemented around the seasonal demands of farming life. Observational data revealed that during the nine months intervention period participants acquired essential employability skills (e.g. teamwork, communication, problem solving and planning) and life skills (e.g. healthy living and nutrition and cooking skills). These skills were systematically learnt through engagement with the care farm's every day activities, such as learning how to feed and care for livestock, cleaning and maintaining the farm, and tending and harvesting fruits and vegetables. From the start, observational data showed that participants actively engaged with various farm tasks and were motivated and willing to continue to do so. The tasks were effective in helping participants to develop skills, such as communication and problem solving and to explore feelings of responsibility, achievement and pride. The findings of this work supports previous research findings (Melson, 2001), which showed that there is a connection between purposeful activities and a greater sense of responsibility when working in a natural environment.

'I've learnt a lot of new skills like feeding animals, doing hay, how to pick up a wheelbarrow and what needs planting or picking and digging holes. I've got to learn to drive the tractor. Lots of handy practical skills' (Lillian: post-i).

'I've learnt the foods that you can't give animals. Like the pig food you can't give other animals because it's got copper in it. I've learnt what the five freedoms are, I've learnt them. And just skills like that and working as a team' (Cooper: post-i).

Another element of the care farm intervention was to teach participants the protocol of social interactions as part of the life skills educational component, so that they can manage their behaviours more effectively in a more restrictive social environment, such as a classroom. Observational and interview data confirmed that participants were able to recognise and adhere to positive social etiquette, including recognising behavioural boundaries. The latter is an important skill, as it promotes education and learning. Boundaries enable an individual's harmonious functioning within the structures of the learning environment.

However, boundaries can be set by 'teachers' in a variety of ways. Previous studies have confirmed that individuals given controlling boundaries demonstrated significantly less intrinsically motivated behaviours compared to individuals who were set autonomy-supportive boundaries (Koestner, Ryan, Bernieri & Holt, 1984; Tsai, Kunter, Lüdtke, Trautwein, & Ryan, 2008). In the current study, the mentors provided participants with autonomy-supportive boundaries, which allowed them to be creative in their choices and enabled them to approach tasks and solve problems using their abilities and curiosity. Participants commented during observations that teachers at school were often 'controlling' and did not allow them any flexibility towards learning in the classroom, which diminished their interest in learning. The autonomy-supportive environment of the care farm appeared to be the key difference in participants' desire to engage with learning at the farm in comparison to school.

Life skills are abilities that are necessary (or desirable) to enable an individual to fully participate in everyday life. Although there is no definitive list of life skills, they are typically associated with skills that enable individuals to better manage their lives. Life skills help individuals to succeed in achieving their ambitions and to have control over their own life decisions. Enhancing life skills at the farm did not just focus on employability skills, but included activities like preparing food and hot drinks, washing clothes, and caring for themselves in general, which significantly improved participants' chances to manage their basic needs as an independent adult. Without these skills participants' ability to cope and progress further in their lives would have been more limited. As the intervention progressed, it became more apparent that one of the reasons participants were motivated to learn new skills was because they viewed their participation as a matter of personal choice rather than it being compulsory, like school.

'It's not like we're being forced to, it's more of a democracy. It's not really we're being forced to do it. If we don't want to do it we don't have to do it, but we're encouraged to do it, it's not like we're forced into it. We're encouraged rather than forced' (Cecil: post-i).

'They are not like teachers. They wouldn't actually force us to do anything. Like at school, if I didn't want to do my work they would force me to do my work. Here, if I don't want to do it and I really don't want to do it, I won't have to do it' (Hunter: post-i).

The engagement with skill-learning was fun for most of the participants. The tasks were enjoyable and interesting, like helping to feed the baby lambs and moving Betty, the horse

from her stable to the field. Many of the participants talked about how they struggled to sit still and concentrate at school. On the other hand, this care farm intervention used haptic (e.g. sense of touch) and observational learning approaches, which allowed participants to be physically active, to use their hands and to learn by observations rather than being told what to do. The vocational and practical styles of skill learning, combined with the relaxed and autonomy supportive learning environment enhanced participants' learning experiences.

'I get bored easily sat inside at school, but outside at the farm I can do a lot of stuff with my hands and I find it a better to learn like that' (Hunter: post-i).

'It makes you feel proud, it makes you feel, like... maybe if you didn't know you could do it and once you have done it, you feel like, well, like you have proved yourself wrong. And that just makes you feel like you can't wait to use that skill next, to show that you can actually do it again, even if it is something simple, that skill is a skill' (Arthur: post-i).

Participants were further motivated to learn at the farm because they viewed learning as a productive use of their time that would also help them to achieve their developing career goals. Participants loved the farm work and were very responsive to the farmer/mentors, which helped them to gain perspective on their wider life and educational aspirations.

'I've got the skills that I've learnt here to go do that [apprenticeship] in the future because I'm not going to be 'I do not know what to do', because I've learnt here what I need to do with the animals and how I need to be around them and all that, so this, the farm has helped me a lot, for the future. Now though I can use the skills that I've got to help out here [farm] and it seems to help keep me out of trouble a bit at school' (Cooper: post-i).

In this study, for most participants, the care farm intervention has been a life changing experience and helped them to re-engage with formal education. However, it is very likely that some participants would never re-engage with school. Observed conversations between the farmer and participants suggested this was most likely to be the situation for those who had a poor relationship with a specific teacher. The farmer confirmed that from experience those participants are very unlikely to positively turn the relationship around with certain teachers. However, the farm mentors and the farmer would always try to get them to re-engage with formal education. They would coach and work one-to-one with participants and had some success in turning these young people around. In these circumstances, the farm

helps participants to find different ways of coping with the teacher and the situation(s) by discussing with them different options and solutions to such problems. At month seven of the intervention it appeared that many participants were beginning to use better coping strategies in school.

‘Now, if I’m getting annoyed with someone in class, like the teacher or someone sat on my table, then I count to ten or I might take deep breaths. If it’s nearly break time and I’m feeling agitated during break time, I just like take myself off and spend five minutes on my own until I’ve like cooled off. Before, I’d have reacted to the situation straight away by shouting and even throwing books and stuff across the classroom’ (Arthur: post-i).

The quantitative outcomes from this study supported the qualitative data. Participants’ ‘life satisfaction with school’ (measured by BMSLSS-PTPB, Bickman et al., 2010) showed a statistically significant improvement between baseline and post-intervention. This may be reflective of attending the care farm and learning to cope better at school. There was no significant difference between the intervention and the comparison group’s scores post-intervention, which suggested that their satisfaction with school was similar to a ‘normal’ population, despite the intervention group’s difficulties, which made school more challenging for them to cope with.

The approach of mentoring participants one-to-one appeared to increase their self-reported coping repertoires. One coping strategy mentors encouraged participants to use when they were finding a classroom situation difficult, was to remove themselves from the class. This course of action may have got them into more trouble, but at least it prevented participants from being in the classroom where their behaviours typically escalated out of control to acts, such as throwing tables or chairs. The farmer had tried to work with schools to help participants to learn to manage their behaviours by implementing an official ‘exit card’. This would allow the pupil to legitimately leave the classroom if they felt they were unable to control their behaviours and emotional responses, but the schools were not willing to consider a change to their policies. The Department for Education (Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools Departmental advice for school staff, 2016) provides non-statutory advice to schools about positive classroom management to promote positive behaviours, and social development, which can include small group work, counselling, and working with parents. However, strategies utilised are determined by the preference of individual schools. The lack of cooperation by participants’ schools in response to the farm’s suggestions to help improve young people’s behavioural management in school reinforces the need for

services to work more closely with each other to find solutions that will help young people manage their lives more effectively. The disjointed approaches of the educational, social, and youth services that needed to manage participants overall well-being appeared to disadvantage participants and make their classroom experiences more difficult to cope with. The RE-AIM evaluation thus revealed that while the care farm intervention was successful in helping participants to improve the behavioural, psychological and social outcomes observed in this study, these were limited by external factors outside the structure of the care farm intervention.

The hope of having a future encouraged participants to behave better at school in order to gain certain GCSE grades. Verbal and non-verbal skills, team work skills such as communication, planning and problem solving, assertiveness and negotiation skills were all interpersonal skills that were learnt through the care farm intervention programme. For participants, belonging to the care farm family meant a sense of stability, which provided a platform for skill learning to occur. Some participants re-engaged with school because the intervention taught them behavioural skills to manage relationships with their teachers and peers. The farm also provided a break from school for participants, which enabled them to cope more effectively with problems on the days they were at school.

School holidays:

The farmer and the mentors invited some of the participants, who required extra support during the school holidays to help out at the farm, because during this time the farm sessions were not funded. The care farm evaluation showed there was forward planning and understanding of how to reach and enable these young people to benefit from attendance. Help with transport and any other logistical issues provided directly by the farm staff ensured participants were able to attend the intervention. The farmer was aware (from experience) that, the most disadvantaged participants may not be able to attend the farm during the school holiday period and therefore planned ahead and ensured that all who wanted or needed (e.g. poor home environment) to attend could. This was to make the intervention accessible for the most hard to reach participants and to avoid any set-backs from progress they have made from attending the care farm during term-time. The school holidays were typically challenging for these young people because they often lived in volatile situations with no support. Due to financial limitations of this study, the researcher was unable to observe any of the young people who spent time at the farm outside of the term-time

sessions. However, the interviews data revealed that for the young people able to attend the farm during the holidays, continued access and attendance was important to their well-being.

‘The farmer lets me come here [farm] sometimes in the school holidays to help out. I love not missing out on being here. Like, to be honest if I’m just stuck at home I end up getting myself into trouble because I’m not happy, and then I start to get angry which is even worse. So, it’s really good for me ... and I get to help the farmer and everyone else [mentors] because they all work really hard’ (Arthur: post-i).

Duration of attending the care farm:

This study using the RE-AIM framework identified that there needs to be continuous support for young people attending the care farm to strengthen its reach of this population. Young people’s problems do not cease during school holidays and the current lack of support for continuing attendance highlights the gap in the social and youth services provided for disadvantaged youth, living in rural England. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 8 (Recommendations section).

Both the participants and the farmer agreed that spending one academic year at the care farm was often not long enough for the most disadvantaged participants in order to make enough progress to independently cope with their difficulties. Although all of participants made positive progress, it was clear from the quantitative and qualitative data that those facing the most severe difficulties made less progress in all areas measured or observed than those dealing with less severe difficulties. Quantitative data yielded in this PhD thesis, showed trends for improvement in psychological functioning, but the change was not statistically significant. Perhaps, confirming the intervention was simply not long enough for this effect to take place, or that the sample was not large enough to detect that difference. Therefore, to improve the reach capacity of this and other future interventions, further funding should be allocated to ensure longer term attendance. The duration of the intervention programme will be discussed further in Chapter 8 in the recommendation section.

All participants who were interviewed expressed their reluctance and extreme sadness at having to leave the care farm and agreed that they would recommend attending the care farm to potential service users and service providers. Participants said they would recommend attending the care farm ‘to help cope with life and school’, ‘to have a break from

all the trouble at school and at home', 'to meet new friends and have fun', 'to spend time with animals and explore outside' and 'to come somewhere that feels like home'. This data confirms that it is vital to reach this disaffected rural population and that the present care farm intervention is working for those who attended during this PhD study.

Summary

The key findings from the data suggest the farm curriculum and the green space had a positive effect on participants' skill-learning, interpersonal skills and re-engagement with school. The skills learnt at the farm were beneficial to participants, helping them to secure training and/or a job beyond 16 years of age. The hands-on activities helped participants to learn new skills, unlike at school where they struggled to sit still and concentrate. In the care farm's autonomy supportive environment participants were able to flourish and to develop farm and career related employability skills that enhanced their enjoyment of learning. Participants were given tasks that were appropriate to their own abilities (Cunningham, 2005). Thus the participants' engagement was related to the type of task in conjunction with how the task was explained and delivered by a mentor (Ames, 1992). The findings of this study established that the care farm intervention was successful in re-engaging participants with formal education and reduced the risk of them becoming NEET.

The findings supports the Self-Determination Theory, by suggesting that learning at the farm was more successful than at school because mentors' support of participants' psychological needs for autonomy (e.g. by minimising academic pressure, increasing participants choices and providing a meaningful rationales for learning), competence (e.g. providing challenging but interesting, structured activities with constructive feedback), and relatedness (e.g. through the sense of belonging and trust which has been built in the farm environment) facilitated and promoted participant engagement.