



**University
of Victoria**

Graduate Studies

Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

SHELBY BOUTHILLIER

BEd (University of Victoria, 2015)

**“The Impact of Therapeutic Riding:
A Mixed Methods Case Study of Families’ Social Connectedness”**

School of Exercise Science, Physical and Health Education

Friday, September 13, 2019

4:00 P.M.

Clearihue Building

Room B017

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Vivienne Temple, School of Exercise Science, Physical and Health Education, University of Victoria
(Supervisor)

Dr. John Meldrum, School of Exercise Science, Physical and Health Education, UVic (Member)

External Examiner:

Dr. Cathy MacDonald, Physical Education Department, State University of New York College at
Cortland

Chair of Oral Examination:

Dr. Michael Emme, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, UVic

Abstract

In 2018, the Cowichan Therapeutic Riding Association (CTRA) connected with the University of Victoria to initiate a research project focusing on social connectedness. Social connectedness is the psychosocial process of belonging that can be developed within a community context. Feelings of social connectedness can reduce depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts, lessens violence, health compromising behaviours, and the impact of stress and trauma, and is linked to high self-esteem. The aim of this mixed methods case study was to understand the social connectedness of families participating in a community therapeutic riding program.

An explanatory sequential mixed methods design was used to investigate social connectedness at the CTRA. Three different perspectives were sought to explore social connectedness at the CTRA; guardians, children, and instructors. Participants completed the quantitative Connectedness to Treatment Setting Scale (CTSS) in Phase 1, and qualitative semi-structured interviews in Phase 2 to follow-up and expand upon findings from Phase 1. Fifteen participants (guardians ($n = 12$) and instructors ($n = 3$)) participated in Phase 1 of the study whereas five guardians (including a guardian and child dyad) and two instructors participated in Phase 2 of the study.

The CTSS comprised of 10 questions assessed on a 6-point scale (from 1 = Totally disagree to 6 = Totally agree). Frequencies were computed for each question and overall mean scores ($+ SD$) were computed for guardians and instructors separately. The interview transcripts were coded twice. Initially, a deductive orientational approach guided by seven attributes of social connectedness was used. Then, an inductive approach was used to examine how social connectedness was experienced, fostered, or hindered at the CTRA, as well as suggestions for improvement.

The CTSS scores revealed that the vast majority of guardians and instructors felt highly socially connected at the CTRA. The overall mean score of the guardians was 55.3 ($SD = 4.5$) and 56.7 ($SD = 3.1$) among the instructors. All seven attributes of social connectedness were represented in the guardians and instructors' responses however, trust, caring, and reciprocity were the most evident attributes. Two themes emerged from the inductive analysis: effective communication equates with social connectedness and expectations of services. Guardians

reported that communication as a team with their instructor, volunteer(s), and the animals positively influenced their families' social connectedness. The results suggested that social connectedness might be mediating relationships between negative factors preceding a therapeutic riding session and the experience of that lesson. Although the instructors and majority of families were socially connected at the CTRA, guardians had high expectations of the program and wanted the CTRA to foster connections beyond their son/daughters therapeutic riding lesson by organizing opportunities for peer and family relationships.

The people and animals at the CTRA contributed heavily to family's sense of social connectedness. Most families had a desire to connect and form relationships with the people and animals at the CTRA. The CTRA provides a community context that supports the development of social connectedness.