

From the Global North to the Global South: the contribution of equestrian sport and leisure to children's informal learning

Cite this paper as:

Monterrubbio, C., & Silva, S. (2023). From the Global North to the Global South: the contribution of equestrian sport and leisure to children's informal learning. *World Leisure Journal*.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/16078055.2023.2259338>

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<https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/RVFNHJCVSVZ4WJEHAXY3V/full?target=10.1080/16078055.2023.2259338>

Abstract

The Global South has been largely excluded from equestrian sport and leisure debates. In particular, the equestrian experiences of children in developing countries have remained silent since most of the studies on equestrian sport and leisure have focused on the experiences of adults in the Global North. Despite the fact that equestrian sport and leisure are part of children's practices in countries of the Global South, very little is known about the benefits of equestrian sport and leisure in early childhood education in developing countries. This research explores the contribution of equestrian sport and leisure to children's informal learning. From an ethnographic approach to children's equestrian practice in Mexico, the study reveals that equestrian sport and leisure contribute to developing socialisation, teamwork, discipline, and interspecies communication skills in children. This brief paper contributes to incorporating countries from the Global South into the global debates on equestrian sport in general, and on children in sport and leisure in particular.

Introduction

Equestrian practices from the Global South have been largely excluded from global leisure debates. For a long time, leisure studies have been dominated by countries of the Global North (Carnicelli & Uvinha, 2023), and this applies to studies on leisure and equestrian sport. According to Adelman and Thomson (2017), studies on equestrian practices and cultures have been developed mostly in European and North American contexts. As a consequence, the ways human-horses interactions are conceptualised and understood have been dominated by countries of the Global North. Although research in Brazil (Adelman & Becker, 2013), Mexico, (Monterrubbio et al., 2023), China, Iran, Morocco, and South Africa (see Adelman & Thomson, 2017) have documented some equestrian practices, cultures and experiences from Global South perspectives, much is still unknown about equestrian cultures and their social role in societies of developing countries.

Throughout history, horses have played a very important role in the development of

societies, including many in the Global South (Pritchard et al., 2005). However, they now play an important part in human sports and leisure activities. Human-horse interactions within the sport and leisure arenas have relevant social implications, but many of these are still uncovered in the context of developing countries, including those in Latin America. From developed countries perspectives, the various equestrian sports and leisure practices have gained significant academic attention in the last decades. A variety of topics such as the economic relevance of the equestrian tourism sector (Ollenburg, 2005), the affective relationships between humans and horses (Dashper, 2014) and injuries in equestrian leisure (Petridou et al., 2004) have remained within the interest of leisure studies in wealthy nations. This has revealed that equestrian sport and leisure offer an opportunity to examine various human-horse relationships as a process of social change (Mukherjee, 2020).

The vast majority of social scientific research on equestrian sport and leisure has focused on adults. Although children in some equestrian sports may be seen solely as passive consumers rather than active participants (Kay, 2008), research has revealed how children can actively participate in their social processes. From global North perspectives, children's and young riders' voices and experiences have been documented. Research on children in the equestrian sport and leisure world, for instance, has shown how young Swedish riders develop important social skills (Thorell et al., 2018) and can become active agents who can explore and experience equestrian leisure in different ways (Rosén et al., 2022). However, the experiences and voices of children involved in equestrian sport in developing countries have remained at the margins of equestrian leisure studies. In addition, there are still many other social implications of interspecies (human-horse) relationships that remain unexplored. In particular, despite the growing participation of children in the equestrian world (Cuenca et al., 2009; Mukherjee, 2020) and the individual and social benefits of sport (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2017), the educational dimensions of sport and equestrian leisure in the child population remain unknown.

Considering *charrería* – the Mexican national sport – as a specific case of equestrian sport and leisure in the world, this study explores the contribution of human-horse sports and leisure relationships in children' informal education. This research offers two main contributions; on the one hand, it documents children's participation in equestrian sport in Mexico contributing to global equestrian sport and leisure debates from a Global South perspective and, on the other, it illustrates the informal educational dimension of equestrian sport and leisure.

Equestrian sport and leisure

Equestrian sports and leisure comprise a wide variety of activities and practices, although many of them are mostly performed in developed countries. These include activities from Olympic sports such as dressage, eventing and show jumping, as well as other popular sports such as polo, endurance, horseball, reining and horse racing. However, there are many other equestrian sports and practices in the Global South that are specific to the societies and cultures in which they are practised. Examples of these include Juego del pato, buzkashi, and charrería, national sports of Argentina, Afghanistan, and Mexico, respectively, where human-horse relationships are signified according to the cultural and symbolic value of sport, leisure and horses.

Unlike other activities, equestrian sports and leisure place the horse in a particular position in relation to humans. Human-horse relationships, unlike any other species, tend to be more intimate, responsible, long-lasting, complex, and collaborative (Hausberger et al., 2008). These relationships are processes that work in both directions and indicate mutuality and reciprocity; as a result, horses are perceived as partners and active actors with the exercise of agency in equestrian sports and leisure (Notzke, 2019). The various ways of interacting, communicating and collaborating between humans and horses - both as active subjects - are spaces where different social processes, including informal learning, take place. Previous research has revealed that human-horse interactions help humans develop patience, empathy, trust, respect, control over one's own emotions and interspecies empathy and communication (Keaveney, 2008).

However, it must be recognised that most of the studies on human-equine interactions have been developed in countries of the Global North; works by researchers from the United Kingdom (Dashper, 2014, 2020, Robinson, 2010), France and the Netherlands (Hausberger et al., 2008), to name a few, have largely defined the current conceptualisation of human-horse relationships. As a result, the understanding of human-horse relationships and the social value of equestrian practices in contexts of the Global South is still very limited.

Informal learning and children

Likewise, the majority of studies on informal education have been developed in contexts of the Global North (Gough et al., 2019). This has also limited the ways we conceptualise and understand informal education spaces and interactions out of the main stream. By adding cases of education in countries of the Global South, we can widen and diversify our understandings of informal learning and its implications as a culture and society-specific

process.

Informal education is “understood as an undefined process that continues throughout life, is not intentional or planned, in which we gather knowledge, attitudes, skills, and perceptions that are the product of environmental influences” (Valdemoros San Emeterio et al., 2012, p. 206). Informal learning is characterised by being supportive, unstructured, spontaneous, voluntary, usually learner-led and non-sequential, and intrinsically motivated (Eshach, 2007). Informal learning is a socialising activity of everyday life; it is acquired through interaction with members of society, family, the environment and, as we argue in this research, through interspecies sports collaboration. It takes place outside of school and can occur in any area of an individual's life, including sports and leisure.

Elvear and Padilla (2003) mention that education outside of school places children in a continuous learning process. When it comes to learning new activities outside the formal education environment, in sports children learn unconsciously not only how to perform different activities but also how to create different bonds, such as camaraderie, which in the case of multi-species sports and leisure takes place not only between humans but also between different species.

Furthermore, Gerber et al. (2021) point out that informal learning can have “profound effects on [children's] achievements in school and their functioning in society” (p. 570). Some sports practices provide children and adolescents with important skills in their development within society, including socialisation, cooperation, coping with stress, tolerance, values, and attitudes (Cruz Feliu et al., 1996). However, the social benefits of child sport in developing countries depend on cultural and institutional conditions that constrain or facilitate sport participation (Pawlowski et al., 2016). Despite the educational potential and significance of equestrian sports for children and young riders in the Global North (Rosén et al., 2022, Thorell et al., 2018), little research has been done regarding the educational benefits of equestrian sport and leisure in children, particularly in the Global South.

The study

Charrería was the context of this study. Charrería is an equestrian sport and leisure practice considered the national sport par excellence in Mexico and is part of UNESCO's Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Although this leisure activity is practised in the United States and bears sociohistorical and national similarities with equestrian practices in countries such as Argentina (Zapata et al., 2021), the cultural and heritage value that charrería maintains with Mexicanness makes it a unique equestrian practice in the world.

Charrería is a specific cultural and leisure practice in Mexico in which issues of cultural significance, history, national identity and sport intersect. This equestrian practice has great historical value and is deeply linked to the national cultural identity in Mexico (Palomar, 2004). Thus, charrería is not just a sport, it is a practice that symbolises Mexican identity, history and traditions. It has inspired art, theatre, cinema, music, literature and the country's craft production. Due to its political and economic position, it has led to sociocultural, economic, political and cultural changes in the country (Sánchez, 2018). Charrería, therefore, is not only an equestrian sport but also a mechanism of individual and collective sociocultural transformation in Mexico.

As a sport, it has two variations, one for men (charros) and the other for women (escaramuza), and is practised by adult and children's teams in multiple categories. The competitions between men's teams consist of nine events (called suertes in Spanish) in which the good control of the horse and the management and domination of cattle (i.e., horses and bulls) are demonstrated. Escaramuza consists of collective choreographic executions at a gallop demonstrating women's riding skills.

In children's competitions there are four categories, defined on age ranging from 5 to 17 years. Unlike escaramuza, in which competitions take place in teams, in the case of children some suertes are in teams and others are individual. Children's charrería is regulated by the Mexican Federation of Charrería ([Federación Mexicana de Charrería] FMC, 2021), which is the major regulating institution of the national sport in the country and aims to preserve Mexican traditions.

This research aimed to illustrate the informal educational potential of charrería in children in Mexico. It adopted an ethnographic approach. Observations of children's participation in charrería training, exhibition and competition spaces in Mexico were made in 2023. The observations were in an open role, revealing the researchers' true identity and purpose. The observations focused on boys' and girls' sports participation and their interaction with other people and their horses.

Additionally, 21 boys and eight girls from 6 to 17 years old who practise the sport were interviewed. A narrative practice and open-ended wh- questions approach was adopted, using simplified language and short interview periods; this approach has been recommended for effective interview work with children (Lyon, 2014). The interview guide included questions about children's initiation in the equestrian practice, likes, experiences and learning, and relationships with their horses. In addition, eight girls made a drawing about their representation of the sport, which was a support for their interviews.

In total, 21 interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Consent for participation was obtained from both the parents and the participating children, and efforts were made at all times to address the three important ethical issues involved in social research with children - vulnerability, competence and power (Morrow & Richards, 1996).

Findings

Children's participation in charrería, in most cases, is the result of an intergenerational practice. Due to the historical and identity importance of a large Mexican population, charrería as an equestrian sport and leisure practice has been transmitted to children mainly by their parents, grandparents and uncles. The children have grown up in charro families, for this reason, they are involved in equestrian practices from a very early age. Charrería, therefore, is part of their daily life and it would be expected that its informal educational benefits would appear from an early age. The vast majority of children only practise charrería as a sport; very few do other leisure activities such as soccer, basketball, or swimming.

The scope of equestrian sport and leisure is not restricted to competitions. According to observations, children perform different roles in various equestrian spaces, including cleaning stables, grooming horses, training, exhibitions, and of course, competitions at local, regional and national levels. Through the various interactions and activities in these sports spaces, children acquire knowledge and develop skills that are not obtained in their formal education spaces (i.e., classroom). As an equestrian practice, charrería contributes to informal child education by developing various skills for the development of children in society. These are presented in the following paragraphs.

Socialisation. Charrería is mostly a team practice. Therefore, communication, collaboration and coordination between the human (and non-human) members of the team is extremely important. Children interact with other children but they are also instructed, accompanied and assisted by adults, family members included. Therefore, children develop communication, interaction, work skills and a sense of community not only with other children, but also with adults. Equestrian sport and leisure activities, thus, allow children to develop social interaction skills between different age groups and species. Equestrian spaces are not only a meeting place but also, as Thorell et al. (2018) claim, a space of social interaction between people who share a common interest in horses.

Teamwork. Teamwork is a fundamental part of charrería; boys are required to work collectively to perform the suertes (e.g., lassoing a mare by her front legs or bringing down a bull), and girls work as a team to perform their choreographies. For this reason, children develop communication, cooperation and coordination skills with the other team members. They come to understand that their performance – riding skills, endurance, speed, strength, and precision, among others – will have an impact on the team’s final outcome. Aline, 6 years old, commented, “I have learnt to talk well with my friends and to make the figure of “the fan” (a specific choreography) more beautifully”. It is also important to mention that an important national identity is built in the charrería (Palomar, 2004), and very strong affective ties are generated, which impacts on, and is impacted by, teamwork.

Discipline and persistence. Children are convinced that if they want to be successful in sports, they must have habits and be consistent in their training. Children have established training days and times and they know they must stick to them. They are aware that they must be constant and responsible to grow within the sport. Camilo, 4 years old, said, “charrería teaches me to be constant, to be responsible... to give it a try, because discipline is important...”. Through equestrian sport, children also develop persistence, convinced that not giving up will lead them to sporting success; Mirna, 6 years old, said: “the coach has told me that we have to try again and again...”

Interspecies communication. Unlike most sports and leisure practices, equestrian leisure is a practice where interspecies collaboration is extremely important (Hausberger et al., 2008). The participation of horses in sport requires constant, direct, intimate and reciprocal interactions between children and their fellow horses. This collaborative participation allows children to develop communication skills and interspecies sensitivity. Children learn to communicate with horses mainly through voice and body movements. They learn to know the physical and emotional state and the collaborative disposition of their horses, and some go so far as to develop intimate bonds with their non-human fellows. Through close relationships with the equine species, children learn about animal individuality, consciousness, and sentience; they recognise horses as sentient animals that deserve a dignified life free of abuse and generate empathy with their partners. “I have learnt to respect and take care of animals; I have learnt to love them [horses]... although they do not speak, they show their affection” (Vicente, 13 years old) (see Figure 1). This confirms Keaveney’s (2008) assertion that “horses teach [children] responsibility, caring, nurturing, and the joy of communicating with another species” (p. 453).

[Insert Figure 1 here].

Conclusions

Social scientific research on human-horse interactions has largely excluded experiences from the Global South. Considering that equestrian practices and cultures, including human-horse relationships in sport and leisure, are defined by specific cultural contexts (Adelman & Thomson, 2017), the existing global understanding of equestrian practices is limited. This commentary aimed to explore the contribution of equestrian sport in children's informal learning in a Global South context. Based on ethnographic work in Mexico, it concludes that children become active subjects in their educational processes within equestrian sports and leisure. Through their sporting performance and the interactions between humans and horses in *charrería*, they develop skills and values that allow them to perform better in their social life. As a specific cultural and leisure practice in Mexico, *Charrería* condenses cultural, national, identity and sports values that configure the social benefits of Mexican equestrian sport and leisure. In this vein, children in Mexican equestrian practices should stop being considered as passive consumers of sport and leisure (Kay, 2008); through the spontaneity, voluntariness and intrinsic motivation that equestrian sport and leisure offer as a means of informal education (Eshach, 2007), children become active individuals in their development as individuals in a Global South society. Furthermore, considering that *charrería* in the United States functions as a space where race and politics intersect, *charrería* children also play an important role to demonstrate their capacity for citizenship and to challenge the structure of economic and political marginalisation by their North American counterparts. (Barraclough, 2019). Children in *charrería*, therefore, can also function as agents of sociopolitical change in the Global North.

By incorporating a Global South perspective, this research contributes to existing knowledge about equestrian sport and leisure. In so doing, this work contributes to reduce inequalities in (equestrian) leisure studies between scholars from the Global South and those from the Global North (Carnicelli & Uvinha, 2023). Additionally, it offers complementary ways to understand child-horse relationships in sociocultural contexts of the Global South. Unlike the vast majority of studies on equestrian leisure, which have been developed in the Global North and largely focused on adults, this study empirically documents children's active participation in Mexican equestrian sport and leisure. In addition, it illustrates the dimension and informal educational potential of equestrian sport and leisure in children, which had not been examined within the field of leisure studies. In this vein, this study concludes that equestrian practices, at least in some Global

South contexts, hold relevant transformational potential for the social processes of those who participate in human-horse interactions in the field of sport and leisure.

Taking this into consideration, equestrian leisure particularly that associated to cultural identity can become an important means for the development of early childhood education in developing countries. Through proper practice and management of equestrian practices, children's knowledge, skills and values can successfully complement the knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom. Therefore, the government, educational and sports institutions can find ways to promote equestrian practices as a means of effective social transformation for future generations in the Global South.

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