Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies

Key Conclusions

1. Overall, PATHS did not have a positive impact upon children’s academic attainment.

2. The evidence does not indicate that PATHS produced differential gains for children eligible for free school meals (FSM).

3. Higher levels of PATHS implementation quality and reach were associated with better academic outcomes.

4. Teachers reported a lack of time to implement PATHS at the recommended frequency. On average, only half of the lessons were delivered.

5. While PATHS does not appear to be a cost-effective way of improving students’ attainment, it may have an impact on other, non-cognitive outcomes. A full report on the NIHR trial looking at these outcomes will be published at a later date. **Update (April 2019):** The findings of the NIHR trial have been published [here](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/).

What is the impact?

- Our analyses indicated that PATHS did not have a positive impact on academic outcomes. The effect sizes produced in the study were mixed and extremely modest, with several analyses favouring students that did not take part in the intervention.
- Teachers felt that there was a lack of time to implement PATHS at the recommended frequency. This meant that on average only half of the lessons were delivered. The delivery context of the trial was representative of real-world conditions, and any attempt to implement PATHS on a wider scale would likely face similar challenges.
- The implementation and process evaluation showed that the impact of PATHS was greater when delivered with higher levels of implementation quality, although these effects could be the result of better teaching overall, rather than the programme itself.
- Similarly, higher levels of reach were associated with better academic outcomes, although this effect may reflect the influence of attendance patterns in participating schools.
- This was the first study in the UK to focus on the impact of PATHS on academic attainment. Previous UK studies have focused on the outcomes of children’s social-emotional competence, behaviour, and/or mental health rather than academic attainment.
- A previous randomised controlled trial from the USA showed evidence that PATHS can improve aspects of children’s academic attainment, albeit to variable and modest degrees. However, the American study experienced an attrition rate of nearly 50%, raising questions regarding the security of the analyses.
- Recent evidence, including the evidence in the Teaching and Learning Toolkit, suggests that high quality, well implemented SEL programmes can impact positively upon a range of outcomes for children, including their academic attainment.
- Given the quality of the evaluation, it is likely that the lack of impact upon children’s academic attainment in this trial can be attributed to the lack of success of the PATHS programme itself.
- The mixed findings may indicate issues in relation to the cultural transferability of the programme. Concerns about whether the programme had been transferred successfully to a UK context were raised by teachers that took part in the trial.
### How secure is the finding?

The findings for Year 6 may be considered of high security, while the Year 5 findings are considered to have moderate to high security. The evaluation was set up as a randomised controlled trial that aimed to compare the progress of pupils who received the programme to very similar pupils who did not. The trial was an efficacy trial, which tested the project in schools where support was made available to optimise implementation conditions (e.g. training led by programme developers, coaching support for teachers).

There were 1,705 Year 5 children and 1,631 Year 6 children in the 45 participating schools. The number of schools that dropped out of the project was less than 20% for the Year 5 cohort, and 0% for the Year 6 cohort. The low dropout rate for Year 6 increases the security of the results and the accuracy of the estimate of the effect it was possible to obtain. In the case of the negative finding in Year 6 English, it appears that the result is attributable to the intervention, rather than chance.

### How much does it cost?

For a single form entry school, the initial cost of PATHS is £6,532. This figure includes the essentials for PATHS implementation: a curriculum pack for each year group from Reception to Year 6, additional/supplementary materials (for example books, CDs, puppets, ‘feeling faces’, and posters), initial training for seven staff, headteacher and/or PATHS co-ordinator training, and two days of coaching time. Schools can also choose to purchase only the PATHS curriculum packs at an initial cost of £2,100. The average cost per pupil for the full intervention is approximately £11.52 a year, over a three year period.