Physically Active Lessons

Key Conclusions

1. Evidence for the feasibility of implementing Physically Active Lessons in the classroom is mixed; both teachers and children reported enjoying the programme, however, the programme created a lot of additional work for teachers and thus, enthusiasm tended to fade towards the end of the study.

2. Teachers found the training enjoyable and helpful, however, they reported that it was sometimes difficult and often time consuming to develop lesson plans and think of ways to integrate physical activity into lessons, especially literacy lessons.

3. More work is needed to develop the programme before it is ready to be tested using a full trial. Additional work is required to develop a programme manual and integrate additional support mechanisms for teachers throughout the delivery period of the intervention.

4. If the programme is taken to a full effectiveness trial it is recommended that paper-based tests are used, additional explanatory variables are measured, and randomisation can successfully occur at the year-group level.

What is the impact?

The PAL approach is feasible, however adaptation and further development is required. All teachers and pupils embraced the programme with enthusiasm at the beginning, but as the school year progressed, enthusiasm started to wane. The difficulties that arose can be condensed into two main themes:

- Firstly, there was no clear set of instructions or support in relation to how to develop and implement the programme. This resulted in inconsistent programme delivery across all five schools, and, because the programme was still in an early stage of development, it meant there was no clear benchmark against which to measure fidelity. At times teachers were unsure whether they were delivering the programme correctly, found it challenging to integrate activities into lesson plans (especially in the case of literacy), and unclear as to whether the programme was achieving the intended outcomes or linking to the curriculum (or teachers’ learning objectives) for their pupils.

- Secondly, teachers had limited time to create and develop new, appropriate activities and lessons, implement the programme in the classroom, and share and upload resources to the online portal with other teachers taking part in the study.

The quantitative part of the study showed no differences in literacy and numeracy attainment between the intervention group and control group, however, the sub-group analyses suggested that the programme might benefit girls more than boys. These results should be interpreted with caution: the study design, missing data, and the non-random sample mean that it is not possible to draw firm conclusions about the programme’s impact on academic achievement. A full efficacy trial is required to establish this. Due to the low proportion of disadvantaged children in the sample it was not possible to explore whether the programme might work better for children from deprived backgrounds.

Is the approach feasible? Mixed Both teachers and children embraced the programme enthusiastically. The programme required a lot of additional work from teachers and consequently teacher enthusiasm began to fade. Is the approach ready for a full trial? No More work is needed to develop the programme before it is ready to be tested using a full trial.
Many of the issues that arose in the teacher and headteacher interviews can be addressed through the development of a programme manual alongside the provision of additional mentoring and support. Such a manual would provide teachers with a clear understanding of the programme’s aims and outcomes as well as a comprehensive guide on how to implement it, including integrating activities into numeracy and, especially, literacy lessons. Finally, a stronger mentoring and support structure needs to be put in place throughout the delivery phase to ensure fidelity and quality of implementation.

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How secure is the finding?

This project was set up as a pilot study that aimed to explore the feasibility of PAL in English primary schools. As such it does not qualify for an EEF security rating.

Within each of six primary schools, Years 4 and 5 were randomly allocated to either intervention or control groups (472 pupils in total). All schools were therefore involved in the delivery of the programme. The children in the treatment group received the PAL programme for two terms, between February and July 2014. The children in the control group did not receive the intervention and represented ‘business as usual’. This was a post-test only design and data was collected in July and October 2014. One of the six schools dropped out after randomisation and before the programme started. Another school withdrew during data collection and so data for their control pupils was not collected. This missing data potentially introduces considerable bias into the quantitative results.

A process evaluation was conducted alongside the trial in order to provide data on programme implementation and to capture the perceptions and experiences of key stakeholders’ engagement with the programme. Key areas explored were the quality of implementation of the intervention, fidelity, and perceived programme outcomes. All headteachers, as well as intervention and control teachers in participating schools, were invited to take part. Three headteachers, all seven intervention teachers and two control teachers agreed to participate. Three focus groups were conducted with 6–10 children in each.

How much does it cost?

The cost of the programme as delivered in the one-year pilot study was estimated at £9.08 per pupil. This estimate is based on 237 pupils receiving the programme, this being the first year of implementation, and includes two initial half-day training sessions. These sessions were provided by an external trainer, costing £2,150 in total. This estimate does not include direct salary costs, supply cover for training, or the out of school time required for teachers to develop the necessary resources. Once teachers have been trained to deliver the programme there are no on-going costs to the school. On this basis, the estimated cost of implementing the programme over three years works out at £3.02 per pupil per year.