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Protocol: A feasibility study and a pilot cluster randomised controlled trial of the PAX ‘Good Behaviour Game’ in disadvantaged schools



Joanne O’Keeffe^{a,*}, Allen Thurston^b, Frank Kee^c, Liam O’Hare^a, Katrina Lloyd^a

^a School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen’s University Belfast, UK

^b Zhengzhou University China & Queen’s University Belfast, UK

^c Centre for Public Health, Queen’s University Belfast, UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the research protocol for a pragmatic randomised controlled trial of the PAX ‘Good Behaviour Game’ in disadvantaged schools. The PAX ‘Good Behaviour Game’ (GBG) is an evidence-based universal prevention programme that blends its themed activities and materials with normal class instruction. The main outcome of the programme is to teach the children the mental ability to self regulate and in doing so, promoting positive behaviour in the classroom. The protocol outlines a research design that will assess whether the GBG programme over a 12-week period can improve a number of specific outcomes in primary 3 children, in a sample of schools identified as disadvantaged. The outcome measures will include both child and teacher reported behaviours, assessing several primary and secondary outcomes related to self-regulation, cooperative learning, self-esteem and pro-social behaviour, including a process evaluation to measure the fidelity, delivery and acceptability of programme and control schools’ activities.

1. Background

Classroom behaviour is a high priority for education authorities who now require that head teachers/principals set out measures in their behaviour policy which aim to: promote good behaviour, self-discipline and respect; prevent bullying and ensure that pupils complete assigned work in the classroom. The GBG has already been shown to reduce aggressive behaviours in later life (Kellam & Anthony 1998; Kellam, Reid, & Balster, 2008) and has an evidence base of positive public health and educational outcomes from trials implemented in different parts of the world including the US, Belgium and the Netherlands (Dijkman, Harting, & Van, 2015; Kellam et al., 2008; Leflot, Van Lier, Onghena, & Colpin, 2013). As a result, interest in the GBG within the UK and Ireland has intensified in recent years with several trials and feasibility studies taking place. There is the potential that the GBG will make a positive contribution by helping to improve self regulation, self-esteem, prosocial behaviour and learning in schools facing significant socioeconomic disadvantage. To date, there have been no trials of the GBG conducted in NI or anywhere with a similar post conflict environment.

2. Intervention

The GBG is a universal behavioural programme, which is designed to be delivered on a whole class basis and can be used by

* Corresponding author at: Queen’s University Belfast, Belfast, Northern Ireland BT7 1NN, UK.
E-mail address: jmulgrew02@qub.ac.uk (J. O’Keeffe).

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teachers as a classroom management strategy. It helps children of any age to learn how to work together, to create a positive learning environment by promoting each child’s positive behaviour. The PAX Game is made up of a number of kernels including the Classroom Vision, PAX language, PAX Quiet, PAX Game (Granny’s wacky prizes), Beat the Timer (transition games) and Tootle notes (PAX Institute, 2014). The central kernel is the PAX Game, which is characterized by rewarding teams for complying with certain criteria, known as the ‘Classroom Vision’, developed by the children and their teacher. The Classroom Vision sets out the agreed desirable and undesirable behaviours. The more desirable behaviours and good things in the classroom vision are called PAX and the less desirable and unwanted behaviours are called Spleems. The novel use of these names reduces the use of negative language in the classroom and helps children to distinguish between the desirable and undesirable behaviour. Spleems can be different in the context in which they are used, for example Spleems during music will be different than those during reading time.

A classroom playing the PAX Game typically has 3–5 PAX teams at any given time. The teacher can generate the teams either randomly or deliberately, depending on the context of the game. The teams can be given identity in a number of ways, for example, by the use of coloured armbands, fun names or simply by seating location. The teams should be balanced to ensure that all children are represented as well as possible. Children who are considered more difficult should never be placed on one team, nor should they be excluded from playing. Teams should be frequently rotated so that children learn how to help each other succeed. Every team can win if it has 3 or fewer Spleems during a PAX Game. The teacher, an adult or a designated class PAX leader can record the Spleems. The team-based approach uses peer encouragement and group rewards called Granny’s Wacky Prizes to help children follow the rules of the game and adhere to the Classroom Vision. Granny’s Wacky Prizes are randomly selected by the teacher or by a nominated child in the winning team. The prizes are fun, play-based, brain breaks, which can last for a few seconds or a few minutes. The prizes include rewards such as 30 s air guitar to their favourite music or time to rest in silence with the lights off. Granny’s Wacky Prize bag has many prize options for the children to choose from and they are encouraged to help invent new and unusual suggestions to add to the prize selection.

Another kernel of the PAX GBG is the use of Tootle Notes. These are paper-based communications amongst the children, expressing PAX to each other. These can be student-to-student, student-to-adult, adult-to-adult, and adult-to-student. Throughout the term all children in the class should receive a Tootle Note so that no child is left out. The Tootle Notes can be displayed in the classroom, kept by the children or brought home. The PAX Game can also be played during transitions, for example, going on breaks or clearing up after a lesson, in this instance the ‘Beat the Timer’ kernel can be used. If the children win the game they receive a Granny’s Wacky Prize.

The final Kernel, which is used throughout the PAX Game, is PAX Quiet. This involves the use of a harmonica to gain the children’s attention and achieve silence. The teacher gently blows the harmonica in a non-threatening manner and raises his/her hand to make the peace sign. The children respond to this cue by also raising their hands in the peace sign, with all eyes on the teacher in a quiet manner. When using the PAX GBG teachers and other adults should notice PAX positively and discuss Spleems in a neutral manner. It is also important to ensure that there is no identification of individual children who have ‘Spleemed’. The overall GBG programme is designed to be used by teachers in a classroom environment but can be used, as needed, anywhere in the school environment where the children who are familiar with the GBG are present.

Each teacher involved in the intervention will receive two days of PAX GBG training and a teacher pack that includes everything they need to implement the programme in their classroom. Teachers in non-intervention schools will receive the training and pack as part of ‘waiting list control’. Teachers involved in the intervention will deliver the GBG programme over a 12-week period using a week-by-week roll out schedule, which will identify all aspects of the game to be implemented. The GBG is played 3 times per day; it initially lasts 10 min but can stretch to 40 min (over the academic year), as the children’s self-regulation and behaviour improves. During the 12-week implementation, class observations will be carried out to ensure the programme delivery meets those set out by the Programme Developer and the PAX Partner Trainers. The teachers who will be trained in the PAX GBG will take a short test and if they successfully implement the programme they will receive a GBG certification from the PAX GBG Partners. Table 1 below summarises the PAX GBG programme implementation using the TiDier Checklist (Hoffmann et al., 2014)

3. Underpinning theory of intervention

As shown in the logic model (Fig. 1), the overall aim of the GBG programme is to increase self-regulation, which as a result can improve behaviour and emotional wellbeing. This is achieved through the use of evidence-based Kernels (Embry & Biglan, 2008; Embry, 2004). Within the GBG, the Kernels promote self-regulation by: teaching the children to stop and start, using rewards for good behaviour, positive reinforcement, encouraging the children to maintain attention and to adhere to the classroom vision which they compiled and agreed with their teacher. It promotes rules of pro-social behaviour and peer concern for classmates by rewarding teams for maintaining behaviour standards (Chan, Foxcroft, Smurthwaite, Coombes, & Allen, 2012).

4. Theory of change

The GBG study is underpinned by self-regulation theory (SRT) which refers to the learning of conscious, self management that involves the process of guiding one’s own thoughts, behaviours, and feelings to attain personal goals. It includes the process of impulse control and the management of short-term desires (Zimmerman, 2001). Fig. 2 illustrates how the Kernels of the GBG may improve self-regulation in those children receiving the programme, which will enable the children to self-regulate their behaviours and teach them to take control of their own interactions with their peers. Co-operative learning and peer relationships are strengthened by the use of positive reinforcement in response to good behaviour demonstrated by the children both on an individual

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