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Primary school girls discover their ‘inner cheerleader’ through the M2 programme: An overview of the research findings

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Introduction: Girls, physical education, school sport and physical activity

It is often claimed that physical education and school sport (PESS) can provide opportunities to transform the lives of those who participate. Research has consistently reported a variety of benefits for engaging in PESS. The development of fundamental movement skills, positive personal, social and health outcomes, and employability and life skills including teamwork, respect, resilience, trust, working with others and leadership have been well rehearsed (Coalter, 2007; Coalter, Theeboom and Truyens, 2020; Holt, 2008). Other suggested benefits include enhanced feelings of belonging (Jones *et al.*, 2020), combatting loneliness (Sport England, 2023), and improving pupils’ attention, engagement and behaviour within school lessons (Daly-Smith *et al.*, 2018; Norris *et al.*, 2020). It is also well documented that physical health and mental wellbeing can be improved through PESS and physical activity (Girlguiding, 2022¹; Sport England, 2023; World Health Organisation, 2020). This latter aspect is particularly important with ongoing concerns regarding young people’s mental health, and the rise in referral rates to mental health services (NHS Digital, 2023²; Sport England, 2023).

Despite these widely espoused benefits, it has long been recognised that girls’ involvement in PESS and broader physical activity can be hampered by a range of societal and structural barriers. These include gendered stereotypes, traditional assumptions regarding femininity, lack of safe, supportive environments, sexist beliefs and behaviours, poor access and opportunity, and limited resources in comparison to boys (Cockburn and Clarke, 2002; Girlguiding, 2022; Mansfield *et al.*, 2017; Oliver and Hamzah, 2010). Thus, tackling girls’ disengagement with PESS and physical activity and

¹ <https://girlguiding.foleon.com/girls-attitudes-survey/2022-report/sexism-and-stereotypes>

² <https://digital.nhs.uk/supplementary-information/2023/mental-health-referrals-by-month-and-by-year-updated>

the barriers encountered must be a priority if the benefits that PESS afford are to be made available to them.

Much of this previous research has focused on teenage girls, in particular the 'drop out' years (typically between 14-16), when there is a marked decline in girls' participation. However, recent research signposts the need to consider how and why the challenges young women face in engaging in PESS and physical activity begin much earlier in their lives. Research by the Youth Sport Trust (YST) has identified a number of worrying trends within the primary school years. For example, at key stage 2, 21 per cent of girls are not confident to be more active at school versus 13 per cent of boys (YST, 2023a; 2023b). Only 57 per cent of girls aged 10-11 years are happy with their body, compared to 83 per cent of boys; and 66 per cent of girls perceive one or more barriers to being more active, double that of boys (YST, 2021a). Moreover, girls are less likely to rate their self-belief as good or very good in comparison to boys (69 per cent v 79 per cent); only 31 per cent of parents think playing sport is important for their daughters in comparison to 41 per cent for their sons; and only 49 per cent of girls take part in a team sport in comparison to 70 per cent of boys (YST, 2021b; 2021c).

Relatedly, Women in Sport (2023) identifies the various ways that girls are stereotyped from a young age, which contributes to beliefs that sport is not for them. For example, labels such as 'clumsy', 'princess', 'worrier', 'kind', 'fragile', and 'girly' are frequently used to describe girls - labels which are the antithesis of those qualities deemed necessary for successful engagement in PESS and physical activity. Women in Sport (2023) also highlight two key areas of focus in enabling girls under the age of 11 to begin a positive relationship with sport and physical activity. First, they note that the limiting narrative that girls are not as competitive or as good at sport than boys, and/or that sport is not (important) for them needs to be challenged. They advocate for more positive messaging that encourages girls' involvement, raises their (and significant others') expectations, and develops girls' confidence and self-belief. Second, they highlight the need to better equip young girls with the fundamental movement skills and opportunities to access and enjoy sport in and outside of school.

To keep girls motivated in sport they signpost four key ingredients: personal achievement; a sense of belonging; peer role models; and experiencing the feel-good factor of sport and physical activity. Women in Sport (2023) also highlight the importance of a collaborative approach in developing young girls' confidence and competence in sport. A combination of parents, teachers, peers, siblings, and community are integral to closing the skills gap, providing more opportunities, and embedding positive attitudes amongst boys towards girls in sport. Programmes built around these principles, like those designed by [M2: Where Movement and Mindfulness Meet \(M2\)](#), have the potential to support girls to overcome barriers such that they can enjoy a positive relationship with their bodies and physical activity.

M2: Where Movement and Mindfulness Meet

M2 is a Community Interest Company committed to creating a generation of young girls that enjoy being physically active and learn to value themselves. Their ambition is to create confident girls that connect physical activity with positive mental health through an eight-session programme. The programme, available to schools and communities, and aimed at girls aged 7-11, combines running and walking activities with mindfulness exercises to develop and strengthen girls' self-esteem and resilience. More specifically, the programme consists of themed discussions, play and games, structured workouts, and journal activities, with the girls learning to listen to their 'inner critic' and 'inner cheerleader' voices. The programme culminates in a celebration event of all that the girls have achieved, typically through a 5 km challenge.

The mission of M2 is not to create a generation of 'runners', but to nurture young girls to enjoy being physically active, with a strong sense of self-worth and self-belief that flows through all aspects of their lives. Since 2015, M2 has delivered programmes to more than 200 schools and 5 000 children across the UK. In 2024 M2 commissioned researchers from the Centre for Social Justice in Sport and Society in the Carnegie School of Sport at Leeds Beckett University to explore the impact of the M2 programme in a sample of primary schools in Leeds, West Yorkshire. This research aimed to generate in-depth insights about the programme to complement ongoing quantitative evaluation activities conducted by M2.

The research methodology

Five case study schools were selected from 30 schools involved in the M2 programme in the 2023-2024 academic year across Leeds and Lincolnshire. Schools were selected by M2 and the research team based on location and the school demographics to ensure a diversity of schools were included. Two visits were undertaken at each school at the start and end of the programme to observe sessions and gather field notes. Observations considered participant engagement and interactions between all those present at the session. Additionally, the research team undertook informal 'roving reporter' interviews with the girls on both visits to capture their immediate thoughts and feelings. Two semi-structured interviews were undertaken with the facilitators of the programme in each school. The first explored roles, experiences with M2, and aspirations and concerns about delivering the M2 programme. The second focused on their thoughts on the benefits of the programme, and what they might change.

The research findings

The findings highlight how creating safe, judgement-free spaces for primary school girls to explore and engage in physical activity can have a significant impact on their overall wellbeing. The research also noted that a real strength of the M2 programme is that it can be facilitated by a range of staff and does not require specialist expertise. The programme was delivered by various personnel within the schools including a teaching assistant, the PE lead, and a classroom teacher. Key outcomes of the programme, as identified by the girls and those running the programme, included: improvements in physical developments and fitness; enhanced social connections; and positive mental wellbeing. We discuss these in more detail next, offering insights from the girls and the facilitators.

(a) Physical outcomes: Improvements in physical developments and fitness

Across the five schools, it is evident that the girls are being more energetic, more focused and have improved fitness levels.

“Fitness wise, week one, we did two laps of the sports hall, and the girls were saying that it is too far, I can’t do it, they were too tired, and by the end they were running five laps, having a break, five laps, having a break.” (Facilitator)

“I’m so much faster, and when I just ran like two steps, I’d get so tired, and now I can run round that whole field twice and then I get tired.” (Participant)

(b) Social outcomes: Connecting with others and developing friendships

Alongside these physical outcomes the girls and the facilitators across all schools discussed the importance of the social outcomes emerging from the programme including how it had brought different girls together. This had resulted in new friendships, and this was particularly important for those who were struggling to connect with peers.

“I felt like I was so shy [at the start], and now I’m not anymore, and I’ve found my inner cheerleader.” (Participant)

“Many of the girls we picked were quiet. Week one they didn’t want to talk to each other, the room was silent. But by the end of it, they were really confident, and loud. They made some really good friends. They are the sort of girls that don’t really have friends, they are quite shy and timid. So, socially they gained lots more confidence.” (Facilitator)

(c) Positive mental wellbeing outcomes: Resilience, pride, and confidence.

Across all schools there was unanimity regarding how the programme had helped the girls beyond physical improvements. This was evident in relation to enhancing the girls’ outlook about themselves and developing other life skills. Resilience, pride, and confidence consistently emerged as positive developments attributed to the M2 programme.

“At the start I was really, really shy. But, now I have built a lot of confidence and I’m actually proud of myself.” (Participant)

“You can get more confidence at PE maybe and we can prove all the people that say ‘oh no sport is only for boys, why are you doing sport?’, we can prove all of those people wrong.” (Participant)

“Probably at around weeks four, five, ... there was a sort of turning point where they just started to get the energy, asking me in the playground when the after-school club was on ... Then, seeing them grow really into confident children who actually had fun and enjoyed it was a real highlight. It was nice to see the smiles.” (Facilitator)

What is particularly important is that many of these physical, social and psychological outcomes were being transferred into other school spaces leading to additional benefits and these are highlighted next.

(i) *More positive attitude towards physical activity*

“They’re always asking me like, if there are any sports trips coming up, like netball.” (Facilitator)

(ii) *Increased engagement in PE*

“Even in PE lessons, more willing to take part ... they were actually up for getting involved.” (Facilitator)

(iii) *Participation in other after-school clubs*

“The year five girls have joined football on a Monday because they weren’t doing any clubs before, which is really good, I’ve never seen them at anything before.” (Facilitator)

The act of attending an after-school club was an achievement for several girls, which could have longer term benefits including a move into community sport. This had been the case with some girls trying new activities away from school. These kinds of opportunities are especially important for those girls whose families might not be involved in sport or know where or how to engage.

(iv) More active in wider community settings

“All these games that we play here, I play at home now ... with my brother and sisters.” (Participant)

“Like one of the girls, she has actually signed up for a karate club, which never in a billion years would I have expected her to go to ... so maybe that has been an impact of getting more kids more active outside of school.” (Facilitator)

“Some of the girls that have done the programme started going swimming this half-term.” (Facilitator)

Importantly, the confidence that developed within some participants had transferred into other school spaces. For example, through girls raising hands in class more, their outlook towards exam results, beliefs in their own abilities, public speaking, and undertaking leadership roles.

(v) Girls raising their hands in class more

“She barely even used to put her hand up in class, so yeah it’s definitely had a positive impact on their confidence which is great.” (Facilitator)

“So, when someone asked a question like, I always never knew the answer like but now like, if they ask that question, like in English or something, I’ll answer.” (Participant)

(vi) A more positive outlook towards exam results

“Like SATs, when we got our tests back, my cheerleader basically said ‘well done, you tried your hardest. It doesn’t matter about the score.’” (Participant)

(vii) Increased belief in their own abilities

“At the start I was worried, you know like I’m gonna stop ... [now] I feel confident, and I can encourage other people ... it feels amazing.” (Participant)

(viii) Public speaking

“The girls have changed ... like tonight when Kellie said she was going to stand up in church... her saying she was going to do that, I could have literally cried when she said that ... that’s why I was like oh my god I’m so proud of you.” (Facilitator)

(ix) *Taking on leadership roles*

“Since doing the M2 ... some of the girls are doing like active leaders. So, they'll go to a different year and do physical activities with the younger children.”

(Facilitator)

Several recommendations emerged when introducing the programme to young girls in primary schools in order to maximise its future effectiveness.

Recommendations for working with young girls in schools

Many of the schools had a targeted approach when recruiting the girls for the programme – those who either lacked confidence, did not enjoy PE, and/or who do not attend after-school clubs. Other successful strategies included: consistent programme delivery for regular attendance and progress; working with the girls to establish what they enjoyed, encouraging ongoing engagement; and the target of an end celebration event. Here, the event had more value when externally recognised (e.g. use of Park Run, or a joint event with other schools), celebrated publicly (e.g. in school assemblies), and supported by others (e.g. parents, teachers in attendance). This latter point resonates with Women in Sport’s (2023) findings that highlight the importance of a collaborative approach involving parents, teachers, peers and community in developing young girls’ confidence, facilitating opportunities, and enhancing skill competence in sport.

To see the full research, click here: [LBU M2 Research](#)

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