Evaluation of the ‘Action for Life’ programme at senior cycle in Irish post-primary schools
Ann MacPhail, PhD

Introduction
It is widely accepted that physical inactivity is one of the key threats to worldwide population health and that physical activity levels in childhood and adolescence have long-term effects that influence the health of a person into adulthood. There has been an increase in interest in relation to how school (physical education) curricula can be effective in developing the life styles that may help children to become active adults, and how schools utilize their full potential to promote health and increase active lifestyles (Trudeau & Shephard, 2005; Fox, Cooper & McKenna, 2004; Wallhead & Buckworth, 2004).

‘Action for Life’
The ‘Action for Life for Secondary Schools’ programme is a framework (produced by the Irish Heart Foundation) for teaching health-related activity and active lifestyles to secondary school students in Ireland. The Action for Life (AfL) at senior cycle is a development of the ‘Action for Life for Secondary Schools’ programme targeted at students in their last two to three years of schooling. The focus of this article is the development of the programme at senior cycle and not the already established secondary school programme.

The aim of the AfL programme at senior cycle is ‘(…) to motivate young people to lead healthy and active lifestyles. Good lifestyle habits adopted early in life will help to offset serious health problems and improve the quality of living’ (Action for Life Lesson Plans and Teacher’s Notes), and this has been evidenced by a number of international authors. There is an acknowledgement that there are currently teachers working with senior cycle physical education classes and continuing to be frustrated by the apparent lack of impact they, and the physical education programme, are having on students’ lifestyles in relation to physical activity.
Nine lessons are included in the programme and include;
1. Broadening the definition of health
2. Physical activity a lifestyle priority
3. Healthy heart activity
4. Barriers to physical activity
5. Variety in physical activity
6. Opportunities to participate in physical activity
7. Physical activity opportunities in the community
8. Fashion influences on physical activity
9. Appreciation of physical activity and adaptation possibilities
A teacher notebook and student workbook accompanies the programme and each lesson.

Evaluation and methodology
The aim of the evaluation of the AfL programme was to involve young people and teachers in educational evaluation, with both being asked about their experiences and opinions of a set of lessons concerned with examining the wider issues of physical activity involvement in senior cycle physical education. The piloting of the AfL programme was carried out and evaluated in four post-primary schools. Interviews were conducted with four physical education teachers involved in delivering the Action for Life lessons. Student focus groups across the four schools resulted in 41 students discussing their experience of the AfL lessons.
Due to space constraints, I will focus on the most obvious trend across the fours schools that emerged. This was the erosion of physical activity time within physical education classes.

Erosion of physical activity
Teachers and students continually reported their awareness and displeasure at the AfL lessons eroding the time that was usually spent in physical education lessons on being physically active. Students valued the opportunity to be doing something different from other subject areas when they attended physical education and implied a level of resentment towards writing and reading that was involved in the AfL lessons;

‘(...) they [AfL lessons] were very good but (...) we have only one PE class in the whole week and (...) it’s kind of a shame taking it up by doing books when we could have been running and everything, more like doing playing sports and things, if it was during a class time, well a normal class time, we wouldn’t mind doing it but it was just taking up one PE class and we’d have no PE for that whole week, so that was the only disadvantage about it’ (Alex).

‘(...) we wanted to do PE instead of doing writing ‘coz it’s the only subject that we really got to move round (...)’ (Kate).

‘(...) it was still fairly educational like, I learned a lot about taking your pulse, about fitness levels and the different sports you can do to improve your fitness like but still it was taking away from the time we’d be doing PE like. I’d prefer to be doing the soccer and the basketball and all that’ (Dennis).

Students were able to articulate how they would envision incorporating some of the AfL lesson content into physical education classes without compromising the type of activity. As one student stated, ‘Put more activity into it [AfL lessons] (...) when we were doing our heart rate and the pulse we used to jog around the PE hall, stop and take our pulse where as we could have a game of soccer or basketball or something and stop and take our pulses then’ (Eric).

There was some evidence that teachers were more comfortable delivering certain lessons of the programme and particular components of a lesson in a way more associated with classroom teaching than teaching in a physical education class. One teacher was very honest in reflecting on the delivery of a particular
lesson, acknowledging that she was more comfortable with the form of delivery, i.e., discussion focused with no physical activity, than the students. She registered that after a point in the lesson students were ‘just wanting to move out of that space and get some activity going’. The teacher also reflected that her unfamiliarity with how best to teach certain aspects through an activity may have led to students’ frustration. She gave an example of how her level of familiarity with certain activity areas fostered or hindered her ability to teach health-related issues through the practical:

‘(…) especially in aerobics I tend to have more interaction with them trying to draw out about the target heart rate and things like that but (…) in a game activity I’m more concerned with the special aspect or the defensive tactics or the attacking as opposed to how demanding it is on your heart (…)

Discussion
There are a number of discussion points that arise and warrant pursual from initial data, a flavour of which has been reported here.

Firstly, how can we best organise school, and perhaps in particular physical education, curricula to help students gain the knowledge, attitudes and skills they need to engage in lifelong physical activity without eroding, and in fact attempting to maintain and increase, the practical activity involvement in school? A number of initiatives including ‘Active Schools’, ‘Health Promoting Schools’ and ‘whole school approach’ have been reported as potential initiatives to motivate young people to lead healthy and active lifestyles, all acknowledging that a physical education programme alone cannot have an impact on public health. However, we must be cautious that such programmes do not reduce students’ opportunities to be actively involved in physical activity through school curricula and that the goals that the goals that specifically underlie a predisposition to physical activity should be emphasized.
Secondly, how can we rethink non-curricula time to motivate young people to lead healthy and active lifestyles? This may include active commuting to and from school, structured activity during school breaks and lunchtime and extra-curricular activity, all of which have been reported to differing levels through the literature. Again, we need to be cautious that non-curricula time does not compromise or become the alternative to including opportunities for students to be physically active within the school, and particularly physical education, curricula.

Thirdly, what are the implications for the role of the physical educator in school in promoting healthy and active lifestyles? Does such a responsibility reside solely with the physical educator or is there a need to acknowledge, and work alongside, others (internal and external to the school), who have the shared goal of promoting healthy and active lifestyles but have clearly different roles, e.g., teachers, coaches, volunteers, health promotion personnel?

Finally, students’ perceptions of what constitutes physical education appears to be exclusively ‘practical’ involvement in physical activity, which they enjoy and wish to retain. There is an implication from this evaluation that students perceive physical education as the main, and in some instances the only, time to be involved in physical activity and do not see physical activity as transferable to contexts outside of school physical education. Some are socialised into using their time outside of physical education to pursue interests other than physical activity and subsequently students see a limited opportunity to make up such activity outside of school.

Conclusion
In discussing a youth physical activity promotion model, Welk (1999) suggested a social-ecological framework where physical activity is promoted through a coordinated school health programme, with links established between the school, family and community. As Welk states, self-regulation is difficult to establish
without broader social and institutional support. Perhaps, then, school curricula alone cannot develop active lifestyles. In fact, programmes that reside within school (physical education) curriculum may be creating a social vacuum of physical activity where the expectations to become involved in, and maintain, an active lifestyle resides solely with physical education. It is not necessarily a case of only re-adjusting the content of specific programmes delivered through physical education, in this evaluation the AfL programme, but rather establishing multiple learning and experiential contexts, within and outside the school, in which promoting active lifestyles resides. The Irish Heart Foundation are working in co-operation with the Junior Cycle Physical Education Support Service to establish such learning and experiential contexts in the development of the AfL resource. It is anticipated that such partnerships can draw on the expertise of physical educators and health / fitness professionals in not only a quality delivery of the Health Related Component of junior cycle physical education but also in providing positive physical activity and physical education experiences for young people. The formal dissemination of the revised AfL teaching resource is expected later this year.

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References

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