

# ACTIVE LEARNING AND ITS ROLE IN CLOSING THE LOCKDOWN GAP

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**T**he announcement by education secretary, Gavin Williamson, in July 2020 that he was guaranteeing £320 million of funding from the Primary PE and Sport Premium during the academic year 2020/21 was welcome relief to many schools who had been battered by months of lockdown. The Department for Education also confirmed that any funding from the previous academic year that schools were unable to use as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic could be brought forward to use this year. This will give school leaders an opportunity to add to their existing provision or make improvements that will benefit pupils in future years.

However, with one lockdown poll revealing that 70 per cent of teachers were concerned that their pupils' education had been harmed<sup>1</sup>, many schools are wondering whether they have the time and capacity to examine how best to use this funding on top of the additional pressures that are being placed upon them. This is a particular issue as teachers are also expected to deal with the mental health issues that children may have experienced due to lockdown.

## ACTIVE LESSONS

One way of making sure key lessons are delivered whilst improving the physical and mental health of pupils is to introduce active learning. Active learning is the process of having children move around the class and physically interact in lessons as part of the learning process rather than sat at a desk passively taking in information.

For example, in English lessons, rather than sitting at desks in the classroom answering comprehension questions in text books,

pupils go outside and race in teams to the other end of the playground to collect the correct answer. Or each pupil can be given a word and children throw a ball to each other to form a sentence using the correct conjunction. An element of competition can be added to the learning experience too. Teams can compete by playing charades to act out the meanings of new words or become dictionary detectives to spot misspelt words dotted around the room.

In maths, rather than learning how to tell the time by looking at pictures of clocks on a page or screen, in the playground pupils become the numbers on the clock and use skipping ropes as hands to learn the different times. Or children can go on treasure hunts around the school to identify different 2D and 3D shapes or measure the perimeter of various items.

## MAKING LEARNING FUN

Many schools have already begun to introduce active learning techniques and believe it will be the ideal solution to tackling the issues that lockdown has created. Holy Family Catholic School in Addlestone, Surrey, is targeting inactivity by giving children the chance to be physically active in maths and English lessons. The school uses Teach Active, a website that provides teachers with lesson plans for teaching primary maths and English lessons through a range of physical activities linked to the National Curriculum. Steve Tindall, Head Teacher at the school, is a firm believer in active learning to help improve mental wellbeing: "Active learning changes the psychology of learning as children forget that it's English or maths. They are just learning while they run round having fun with their friends."



<sup>1</sup> <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/coronavirus-attainment-gap-could-widen-by-75-dfe-official-warns/>





The school has noticed that being more active helps children to collaborate and work together in teams. “The activities will help them reconnect with friends and adjust to socialising in school once again, following what, for some, has been an intense period of isolation.” The impact on children’s enjoyment of the subject is palpable too. The school first began to use active learning techniques in maths and the results prompted them to introduce the techniques into English. “Maths used to be our pupils’ ninth favourite subject, but since we introduced active learning in lessons, it has risen up the ranks to take third place after art and PE. We’re delighted about that.”

Emma Marshall is a specialist subject lead for PE at Colmore Junior School, Birmingham, which is also a convert to active learning techniques and believes they will help with the transition period back to school. “Children’s concentration and energy levels will not be what they were prior to lockdown and schools need to help build this up again. By introducing more physical activity, such as scavenger hunts to find solutions to a range of maths problems hidden around the school, we have found that children enjoy the activities far more, whilst still learning.”

### LACK OF MOVEMENT

St Mary’s RC Primary School in Manchester is another school getting children more active throughout the day. Prior to lockdown just 40 per cent of pupils in Manchester were doing the recommended 60 minutes of daily activity. According to research<sup>2</sup>, this number dropped to 19 per cent in lockdown nationwide and seven per cent did no physical activity at all.

Introducing active lessons has not only helped to increase movement but also improved attainment in maths and English across the school. As the learning is disguised through physical activity, children are more willing to solve problems that they would otherwise struggle with; this has had a significant impact on their overall maths ability and confidence. As one child at the school says, “I really look forward to maths lessons now because I like moving around to learn and it’s helping me understand what I am learning better.” Teachers and pupils at the school are also more mindful

of reaching their goal of 60 minutes of daily activity, which has not only had a positive impact on their mental health but on their physical health too.

Neither children nor schools have experienced anything like lockdown before and, unfortunately, there is no guarantee when things will return to a more normal state. Until then, it’s important for schools to continue to support children academically, physically and mentally throughout this uncertain time. Including active learning lessons throughout the day is a great opportunity to target the learning gap and the activity gap in an exciting and engaging way. ■

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youthsporttrust.org/evidence-paper-impact-covid-19-restrictions-children-and-young-people>

**Jon Smedley is a former teacher and founder of Teach Active. Any teacher can access up to 50 active lesson plans in English and Maths for free for a trial period at [www.teachactive.org](http://www.teachactive.org), many of which are social distancing-friendly.**