

The Impact of COVID-19 on Playwork Practice

Abstract

This study used a semi-structured approach interviewing 22 participants currently working in playwork. Participants were asked what they thought was the purpose of playwork and comment on their playwork practice because of the lockdown from COVID-19 in the United Kingdom (UK). Using thematic analysis, three purposes of playwork practice were identified: advocacy; compensatory and facilitation. In relation to their playwork, the lockdown resulted in playwork practice stopped and staff being furloughed. For others, playwork practice continued which was either non-face to face by providing resources or there was a change of focus, for example providing online play sessions or working in a 'hub' located in schools reflecting the three themes identified as the purpose of playwork . This study identified the adaptable and versatile nature of playwork that has enabled some form of playwork practice to still operate being facilitated more as a compensatory outreach provision, whether virtually or supplying or resources during the COVID-19 lockdown and the importance of maintaining relationships with the children and families in the communities where playwork provision so continuing to advocate the importance of play in children's lives. These qualities of playwork have a lot to offer once the restrictions have been lifted in both playwork specific provision such as adventure playgrounds but also in other contexts where playwork practice is undertaken. This includes schools and could also include pre-school and daycare provision.

Keywords: Playwork, Playworkers, COVID-19, Lockdown, Play

Introduction

In March 2020, the United Kingdom (UK) went into lockdown as a response to the control and spread of COVID-19. This had an impact on everybody. Children, young people, and adults had their movement restricted to essential travel only. Essential travel, for the most, was only allowed to those designated as key workers where the UK Government published on their website a list of key working services (UK Government, 2020a). Most services and provisions for children and young people were closed which included playwork provision. This paper is part of a three-month study on how COVID-19 impacted on playwork and playworkers who up to March 2020 worked in adventure playgrounds, before and after-school clubs including wrap-around care and open access projects in their local parks and communities. The focus of the study was a response to a playworker's posting on a playwork social media page "Can playwork be considered as a key working role?". This paper does not address this question specifically (see King, 2020); the focus is the response to COVID-19 pandemic from a playwork perspective. Due to the lockdown conditions, all interviews were undertaken by the computer package Zoom[®] with playwork practitioners working across a range of play provision.

Background to the study

In January 2020, the World Health Organisations (WHO) named a new β -coronavirus as SARS-CoV-2, or COVID-19 (Guo et. al, 2020). From the original outbreak in Wuhan, China COVID-19 has now spread globally. COVID-19 is passed by human-to-human transmission and can result in fever, cough, fatigue, and gastrointestinal infection symptoms (Guo et. al, 2020). The rapid spread of COVID-19 across the world resulted in the UK initially asking people to self-isolate and quarantine of suspected cases (National Health Service (NHS), 2020). This was followed by a 'lockdown' announced by the British Prime Minister on the 23rd March 2020, initially for three weeks (POLITICO, 2020). Following the lockdown, the

following people were considered to be key workers: Health and social care; Education and childcare; Key public services; Local and national government; Food and other necessary goods; Public safety and national security; Transport and Utilities, communication and financial services where:

‘If workers think they fall within the critical categories above, they should confirm with their employer that, based on their business continuity arrangements, their specific role is necessary for the continuation of this essential public service’ (UK Government, 2020a)

On an online discussion forum, the following question was raised “Should Playworkers be considered as key workers?”. This posed and raised an interesting and valid point as playworkers are not residential care workers or teachers and do not consider themselves as childcare workers, although they often work in childcare settings. Outside of childcare, playwork can take place in diverse environments such as adventure playgrounds (Hughes, 1975), hospitals (Bonel & Lindon, 2000), prisons (Quaintrell, 2020), and in open spaces such as parks and public green spaces (King & Sills-Jones, 2015). Playwork within the UK, irrespective of the context where it is practiced, is supported by the eight Playwork Principles which “establish the professional and ethical framework for playwork and as such must be regarded as a whole” (Play Principle Scrutiny Group, 2005, p. 1) (for more details on the history of the Playwork Principles see Conway, 2007). The Playwork Principles apply to anybody working in playwork across the UK and focuses on the process of play, rather than using play for desired outcomes as in primary education (Howard & King, 2014) where the playworker “advocates for play when engaging with adult

led agendas” (PPSG, 2005, p. 1) where children have a right to play as reflected within Article 31 of the United National Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN General Assembly, 1989).

This focus on the process and right of play is one of the distinguishing features of the playwork profession (King & Newstead, 2020); however, this has often led to a misunderstanding of the purpose of playwork by other play related professions (King, 2015). This misunderstanding can be attributed in part to how the purpose of playwork has changed over the last forty years. Since the first introduction of the term playwork in 1979 (Joint National Committee for Playwork (JNCTP), 1979), the purpose of playwork has been defined as the creation of space to support children’s development (JNCTP), facilitate play opportunities (National Playing Fields Association (NPFA), 1999), compensate for the lack of play (Brown & Webb, 2005) for children’s play opportunities to support development, the co-creation of the play space (Russell, 2019) and advocating for children’s right to play (Kilvington & Wood, 2010).

Playwork in the UK is funded from three main sources: Statutory, Third (Voluntary), and Business sectors (Warwick Institute for Employment Research (WIER), 2010). Funding in the Statutory sector is through local government budgets where playwork is delivered within each Local Authority boundary. However, local authority funding it is not compulsory for playwork. The Third or Voluntary sector second are non-profit organisations, for example, a charity, and rely on grant funding to operate. The last sector is where playwork provision is run as a business where funding is entirely from parents or carers paying for their children to use the service, for example, a holiday playscheme.

For many children and young people, the opportunity to play on an adventure playground, in their local parks and open spaces, or attend an afterschool club or holiday playscheme all facilitated by playworkers may be the only ‘quality space’ to play outside of education, childcare, and their home environment. As playworkers are not considered as key workers, this resulted in playwork practice being stopped in the parks, adventure playground, and after school clubs. To support key workers, the UK Government instructed Local Authorities to implement a ‘cluster or hub model’ (UK Government, 2020b). A cluster or hub is one location where any key working children can be educated and looked after whilst their parents and carers undertake a key working role, for example, a doctor. Most hubs were situated in schools, although other venues such as family centres were used, however these were only accessible for families of keyworkers. The closing of adventure playgrounds, afterschool clubs and holiday playschemes impacted on both the children who attended, and the staff employed to support children’s play.

With teaching now being online, and childcare provision provided for essential key workers, how has playwork been able to respond to COVID-19? As part of a study on whether playwork could be considered as a key working service, this paper focuses on what happened to playwork provision when the UK Government put the UK into lockdown. The main aim of this paper is to explore how playwork practice has been affected by the lockdown imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic where two questions were posed to the participants.

How would you describe the main purpose of what your playwork practice does?

How has the current COVID-19 impacted on your playwork practice?

Method

This study was granted ethical approval from the College of Human and Health Sciences Ethics Committee, Swansea University. A qualitative study using semi-structured interviews was undertaken as this enabled playworkers' views, opinions, and experiences to be gathered as they experience the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown.

Participants

Participants were invited to take part in the study through online social media using Twitter® and playwork specific Facebook® pages. This approach was used as it targeted specific playwork individuals and organisations to both distribute the research and recruit participants by snowball sampling (Bernard, 2013) although there is a potential risk of a lack of participant diversity in using this approach (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018). Interested participants were sent the Participation Information Sheet (PIS) and consent form which they signed and returned. Once the consent form was returned, an interview was arranged at a date and time for their convenience.

The number of participants who took part in the study was 22 representing different playwork roles. All participants had worked in the playwork sector for between 5 and 30 years. Twelve participants worked in a management capacity. This included two managers responsible for wrap-around care, two managing an adventure playground, and one an open access play project in the local parks. The remaining managers worked for a mixture of statutory and third sector organisations. Two participants worked in playwork development and a further two were face to face practitioners. Three participants were more strategic working for national play organisations. Three participants were 'a bit of everything' where they were more freelance playworkers. All these different roles in playwork reflected the

diversity of playwork practice. This included face to face practitioners at both playworker and senior playworker level, play development officers, playworkers running specific projects, playwork trainers, and those working at a strategic level e.g. Director.

The diversity of the participants playwork role reflected in the different types of playwork provision. This included adventure playground, open access play ranging, after school clubs, holiday playschemes, wrap-around provision, and national organisations. The labelling of provision as playwork or childcare was not clear-cut and reflected in the following comment:

“we’re a childcare setting but we use a playworker ethos, a playwork ethos and have done for a good number of years now” (Interview 15)

Participants with a management role were responsible for playwork team ranging from 5-6 people up to 270. This included paid full-time and part-time staff, paid sessional staff, and volunteers.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken as this enabled the use of an interview guide (Bernard, 2013) where a “written list of questions and topics are covered in a particular order” (Bernard, 2013, p.182) as in structured interviews, but allows “the freewheeling quality of unstructured interviews (Bernard, 2013, p. 182). The interview schedule included the two specific questions which form the focus of this paper:

- How would you describe the main purpose of what your playwork practice does?
- How has the current COVID-19 impacted on your playwork practice?

The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the flexibility of follow up questions from the structured interview guide. For example, one participant introduced the term ‘playwork plus’. This was questioned further for clarity which related to other aspects participants discussed around providing food banks. Another example where following up questions and probing was required related to the participant whose play team ran the school hubs.

All interviews were undertaken remotely using the Zoom® platform. This enabled a face to face interview to be undertaken and be recorded for transcription and analysis and so adhering to the UK Government lockdown restrictions (POLITICO, 2020). At the start of the interview, participants were reminded of the purpose of the study, confirming informed consent was granted, and participants being aware of their right to withdraw from the interview at any time.

All transcribed interviews were stored into a Microsoft Word® document and then uploaded into the Nivivo 12® software for analysis. Transcription of the interviews was undertaken by listening back to each one to ensure participants’ responses were recorded accurately.

Transcription packages were avoided as it was important in qualitative research to ‘immerse’ yourself into the data (Green et. al. 2007), and by re-winding and listening back to participants’ comments this ensured accuracy in transcribing each interview.

Data analysis was undertaken using the thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This is a six-step process that involved the reading and re-reading of each transcribed interview to further immerse into the data (Green et. al., 2007). This approach to analysis identifies initial codes which are then grouped into themes, a process in qualitative

research called collapsing the data (Elliot, 2018). Analysis was started after interview 16, and up to the final interview (22) where no new initial codes or themes emerged suggesting the data had reached saturation point (Saunders et. al., 2017).

Results

When asked what the is the purpose of playwork, the thematic analysis identified three main themes: advocacy, compensatory and facilitate (see Table 1):

[Insert Table 1 Here]

The three themes from this study reflect the variation of the purpose of playwork found within the playwork literature with regards to advocacy (Kilvington & Wood, 2010), compensation (Brown & Webb, 2005), and to facilitate (National Playing Fields Association (NPFA), 1999).

Theme: Advocacy

The variation in the purpose of playwork in this study could be related to the current job role where participants with less face to face practice highlighted the playwork purpose having a more advocacy role:

“Mostly I see it as advocating rather than anything else for the right of the child to play” (Interview 11)

This advocacy view of the purpose of play can be considered in a political context in respect of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations (UN), 1989) and General Comment 17 (UN, 2017). There were both referred to by participants in respect to children's right to play. The UNCRC consists of 54 Articles that provide the basic rights children and young people should have. Article 31 specifically relates to children and young people's right to play.

Theme: Compensatory

Where the purpose of playwork had a more compensatory role, this was reflected in a socio-political and a therapeutic and developmental perspective. For the socio-political perspective, the erosion of space and opportunities for children play was highlighted:

“Well, it's always been said that playwork is compensation so I would go along with that. It needs to compensate for the way that worlds developed being anti-child and anti-play” (Interview 9)

The compensatory nature of playwork was also considered in a more therapeutic and developmental perspective, especially in consideration with a project which focused on children with specific needs being supported through play:

“We do use the word mitigation what we think about what we do also. I think there's an idea that children will, children will play anyway, but the barriers for them to be able to do that which range from a whole lot of different things” (Interview 20).

Theme: Facilitate

The third theme of 'facilitate' was mostly represented by participants who work in direct contact with children and young people or managing play provision. This included both the facilitation of play opportunities and the play space and the need for a child-centered approach:

“To me, the main purpose of playwork is about I suppose giving power and control over to the children” (Interview 15)

The three themes in relation to the purpose of playwork, although indicating some variation, reflect the Playwork Principles (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group (PPSG), 2004) which underpin playwork practice, education, and training (King & Newstead, 2027). The Playwork Principles were specifically mentioned by three participants. The purpose of playwork as advocacy relates to Playwork Principle No. 4, whilst facilitate links with Playwork Principle No. 2, 3, and 5. The theme 'compensate' can be linked to Playwork Principle No. 1. What is evident is how the purpose of playwork, although recognizing there is a developmental contribution, does focus more on supporting the process of play, not on outcomes (King & Newstead, 2020, King & Sturrock, 2019). Outcomes were referred to by two participants; however, this related to meeting funding requirements or the main purpose of the company, rather than the participants' views on the purpose of playwork.

Impact on Playwork Practice of COVID-19

When the UK Government announced the lockdown in March 2020 (UK Government, 2020a), this had an immediate impact on any child-related provision or service including playwork. From the thematic analysis undertaken, four themes emerged from the data:

[Insert Table 2 Here]

Theme 1: Playwork Stopped

Provision Closed and Staff Were Furloughed

The impact of COVID-19 had an immediate effect on playwork provision and the playworker's themselves where face to face delivery stopped. The types of provision that stopped immediately included those in the statutory, third, and business sectors. One participant, a play development worker in the statutory sector explained how the Local Authority responded:

“So the second the schools stopped, that's when we stopped so we were running to that Friday, knowing some of the other areas had stopped, some of the voluntary sectors had stopped before that, they decided not to mix, that's when we kind of stopped”. (Interview 4).

Here the service stopped in conjunction with when the schools closed. This was not the case for all voluntary sector provision where the cessation of service was undertaken before the closure of schools as one participant explained:

“I got advice from a medical colleague and before schools had shut, as I was thinking about social distancing and the nature of how we operate and how the kids are, there is no way we can stop the spread if there is a virus because of the nature of play and the nature of the interactions of with all the kids and all the staff. So, I said, we need to shut I don't care if the schools aren't shut yet, we need to shut because I think we're highly likely to be vectors” (Interview 12)

The decision here to close before the school was taken by the manager considering the large number of children who used the adventure playground. The children who use this provision could then attend one of sixty different schools. This safety aspect was also highlighted by one playworker who is employed for a provision that supports disabled children and young people:

“We knew earlier on we had to close because a lot of the children are vulnerable, they have significant underlying health conditions” (Interview 3)

The playworker explained how some children required support in their play that included the playworker having their hand on the child or young person’s hand to help them manipulate objects, for example, if doing a cooking activity. The very nature of play, for all children, made social distancing a difficult proposition.

One manager for a before and after-school club and holiday playscheme situated in a primary school explained how the provision had to close after the Easter holidays as there were not enough key working children attending the school being used as a hub to be financially viable to continue running as an after school provision:

“We made a loss I would say of £800 plus that week, that fortnight” (Interview 19).

The financial impact affected other types of provision, especially where the service is a business and relies on fee-paying service users, but also those services run in the third sector that depends on funding, for example, this open access play ranger provision:

“The furlough offer from the government means that as a charity we are more likely to survive, it’s going to be tough because our income has stopped” (Interview 16).

For this open access play ranger service, and another in a different part of the UK where their play provision stopped instantly, this not only had an impact on the service provided but also had a personal impact on participants:

“Suspension of play for me personally and for the charity as a whole it’s difficult for us to cope with” (Interview 16).

This impact on individual playworkers was also felt in other types of play provision, for example, a manager of a wraparound service explained:

“Personally, it’s had a massive impact because I, it’s taken me to be a full-time carer with my children as my partner is still working. It’s come to a standstill as such but I’m trying to implement my playwork experience and knowledge on the day to day home schooling with my kids” (Interview 18).

This aspect of still ‘doing playwork’ even when the provision has closed was also raised with another participant:

“I think it’s interesting to see some of the playworkers I know on social media who aren’t working at the moment. Yet they are still thinking about playwork and still playworking” (Interview 13)

The impact of COVID-19 has resulted in the suspension of face to face delivery and in most cases, playworkers have been furloughed. The decision to close was a result of an overall 'blanket directive' from the Local Authority or a decision based on health or financial reasons. Whatever the reason, the stopping of face to face delivery has also influenced both the playwork service and individuals employed.

Theme 2: Playwork Continued

Provision Still Ran with No Face to Face Delivery

For some services, although face to face delivery was suspended, they were still able to offer a 'truncated' service where children and families could be supported. This was very much evident where play provision supports children and young people with specific needs in the third (voluntary) sector. One play manager explained:

“Yes, yes we've got to focus on what we have and what we're allowed to do and kind off push that really. We have increased our delivery and collection service so the girls are out and about delivering toys. We kind of triage mum on the phone and talk through the issue to see and try and identify something that can help” (Interview 1).

This move from face to face delivery to a more outreach service providing resources was also seen in other areas:

“We came up with this 'bags for play' idea where we are getting bags of loose parts out to children across the county. Particularly children who are living in

disadvantaged areas or who have got social care interventions so we're trying to get the bags out to the children who need them most" (Interview 16).

In addition to providing resources as an outreach service, other play provisions have supported children and families using 'virtual play sessions'. This was explained by a different manager for a service to support disabled children:

"So basically, we run youth groups, we run play sessions, all sorts of things so we've moved everything to a virtual setting. So, we have Zoom meetings, Zoom youth clubs with the kids, they're split into different ages 9-11, 11 to 12-17 and 18-25" (Interview 2).

Although one participant commented "There are some lovely initiatives sending out craft-type kits from scrap banks via food banks. I think, but that's not play that's chewing gum isn't it. It's not the real meal" (Interview 11). The use of 'virtual contact' has been used by many community-based play provisions, such as adventure playgrounds:

"I like the various projects that have done things like using the opportunity of using an image, making a model of whatever of one of their memories, and sharing those" (Interview 9).

The main point for the use of 'virtual play' was not to replace face to face delivery, it was more to ensure contact with the service users, children, young people, and their parents or carer:

“they’ve been doing a nightly storytime, been doing the ‘Demon Headmaster’ and the ‘Worst Witch’, been doing that over their Facebook page so the children are still kind of connected to the adventure playground to see familiar faces in there” (Interview 4)

However, the virtual play contact with children and young people did have limitations:

“A couple of weeks ago we had an online meeting with practitioners and one service had put together all these jazzy resources on Flipgrid Inc., and they had spent a lot of time creating all these nice resources. A couple of weeks later, the feedback is oh you know the kids aren’t really engaging with it, there’s not much engagement and the kids aren’t finding it as intuitive to use compared to the people who created it (Interview 12)

Provision Stopped Running but Changed Focused on Supporting the Children Within their Communities

One common theme that emerged from a community-based provision, in the main the adventure playgrounds, is how the provision had changed from supporting children’s play to supporting families by continuing or starting to act as a food bank. For example, where the adventure playground was already acting as a food bank it has enabled contact with families:

“We run a food bank, so we got around, well food bank and community shop as well, so we get a lot of people coming in for food. So basically, we’ve adapted our service now, we’ve become a food distribution center” (Interview 17).

For others, a change in direction to what the adventure playground normally offers took place:

“Two-thirds of the management team are doing bits of work on-site and there’s a temporary food bank and volunteers are coming in and that information was communicated out to families” (Interview 12)

In one open access provision that stopped running, support and, contact with parents of children who use the project has continued by combining with another project:

“We do have another service which does not come under my remit, my boss manages it which is a service to support children with additional support needs and their families that access play. I have a colleague who manages that. We’ve been able to transition that to our phone support service” (Interview 7)

So, whilst the play provision has not been running, the continuation or opening of food banks and the development of a phone support service has meant some form of contact with the children, young people and, adults within the communities are maintained.

Provision Became Part of or Runs the hubs

Across the UK, whilst schools, childcare and, playwork providers have had to close as children adhere to the lockdown, for parents and carers who work within the UK Government Key working guidelines, hubs have been set up in the Local Authority areas (UK Government, 2020b). For most, the hubs are run in schools and staffed by teachers, however where there is a primary school with some form of before or after school play provision, or

where there is an established Local Authority play team, the focus of their playwork practice has been in either supporting teaching staff, or running the hubs.

Two examples where play provision is run as a business, one a wraparound service and the other offering after school and holiday playscheme provision, both have assisted in the primary schools where they are based in supporting key worker's children and those identified as vulnerable.

“We are still open, and we are continuing to work, but with massively reduced numbers. We only take key working children, vulnerable children and it's costing us money at the moment to stay open. (Interview 10)

Although the play provision is running and playing a role in the hubs, this is restricted to the number of children who can attend, and as highlighted with the wrap-around care discussed earlier, one provision is running at a financial loss. These are examples where the provision runs once the key working children are no longer with the teachers during the school day, although as one participant stated “I'm working in the school term time to cover Pediatric First Aid for the children who are in the school, the key worker children” (Interview 8).

However, there are examples where an established play team are not supporting teachers in the hub, they are running the hub with the playwork staff”:

“We've been asked to co-ordinate and run the hubs, five hubs across the authority plus one for the special needs school” (Interview 5).

These two examples show where existing and established play teams were able to not only staff but also run the hubs with what one manager stated: “a playwork ethos” (Interview 15) and the other as “controlled chaos” (Interview 5). However, not all established play teams are being utilized in the same way where hubs were not set up:

“There was a head teacher, a couple of office staff and there was a load of staff in with the three pupils that were there doing the Joe Wicks video, so it was pointless me being there, so I kind of left from that” (Interview 4).

For another provision, an adventure playground before lockdown, they supported local schools by providing alternative provision during the day for students excluded from school. However, when the lockdown was put in place, they were not involved in supporting any school hub:

“We closed the playground on the Thursday and the alternative provision on the following Thursday, just after we went into lockdown. So, we had a couple of the most vulnerable students still in until they were re-organised with their schools and where they were going to go and what they were going to do. The next day we started handing out food” (Interview 17).

Where the hubs were being supported or run by existing play provision or established play teams, for the key working children who used the provision before the COVID-19 lockdown, this provided familiar faces whilst the key working parents were at work. For those who had not used the provision, this included both key working children and vulnerable children, the

skills of the playworkers working with a diverse and varied range of children and young people enabled relationships to be formed very quickly:

“We’ve got social work referrals coming that have never used any of our services before ... it’s like making it as much as an inviting place possible and then building up those relationships ... they come in and not sure about it at first, after about 15 minutes it’s like they’ve been here for ages” (Interview 15).

Theme 3: Adaptability and Versatility

One aspect of playwork practice that emerged from the participants’ responses was how versatile and adaptable playwork can be. In some cases, the delivery of the services changed to ensure resources were still being provided to children and families to support their play, or the focus shifted to other essential needs such as food. What is evident is the response to the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated how flexible and adaptable playwork has been, summed by this comment:

“We’re a sector where we’re really good at being diverse and diversifying and using and using our skills to work with” (Interview 13)

In respect of the lockdown since March 2020 (POLITICO, 2020) playwork has adapted and show versatility by supporting or running the hubs, providing play resources, changing their focus, or moving onto virtual delivery. Also, examples of providing resources have expanded not just for children, but also for older adults in both their own homes and those living in residential care homes. This is a further demonstration of the flexible and adaptive nature of

playwork, and where funding to support and maintain a core play team has enabled a positive response to COVID-19 from a playwork perspective.

Theme 4: Relationships

This theme identified the importance of the relationships not just with the children, but with the families and the community. The aspect of playwork being about relationships was expressed by this out of school club playworker in a school-based provision:

“We have close relationships with all my families, a lot of the time especially in a big school like ours, I’m the only person the parent gets to know, they don’t get to know any of the teachers. They drop off to me every morning and pick up from me every evening. So, for a lot of them, they only know me” (Interview 8).

One aspect of building relationships, particularly with key working or vulnerable children who have not used the provision before is offering some aspect of consistency:

“The teaching staff come in once a fortnight, so these children don’t know the teachers at all, there’s no relationship built up. If the playworkers weren’t there, it would be Groundhog Day every day for the children coming in, total strangers” (Interview 5).

Discussion

When the UK Government instigated a lockdown in March 2020 this had an immediate impact on everybody. For playworkers who work with children and young people in their playwork practice, this saw the closure of schools, playgrounds, before and after school

clubs, holiday playschemes, and adventure playgrounds. How children will cope not only with lockdown but also when they return to schools and playgrounds will not be known until specific research has been undertaken and analysed. However, concerns have been raised with respect to the need for children to play at school (Dodd, Lester & Cartwright-Hatton, 2020), in their local communities (Russell & Stenning, 2020), and start to access their local play provision, whether it is an after school club, holiday playscheme, or adventure playground where playwork practice can resume to support and advocate for children's play (PPSG, 2005).

The importance of this study has provided a prospective response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the 'here and now', not a retrospective consideration relying on memory or recall.

Qualitative research is about the 'lived experience' (Alase, 2017), and from the 22 interviews undertaken, this lived experience from those working currently in playwork provides an important historical event that has had an impact on everyone's lives. As this study is in the 'here and now', it was important to include as many relevant direct quotes and comments from the participants as this reflected how they felt as both playworkers, and as individual people.

Discussions and debates on what is playwork and what is the purpose of playwork have been going on for years (Newstead, 2017). In the last 40 years, the purpose of playwork has developed to include providing and supporting the space and resources to play for both a compensatory and rights-based rationale. The three themes from this study: facilitating; compensation and advocacy match this where facilitating links with providing and supporting the space and resources and advocacy is intrinsic with a rights-based approach to play reflecting the current Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005). The responses from the 22

participants to the purpose of playwork reflects the variation within the published playwork literature.

However, as with the variation in the purpose of playwork it is clear as a form of play practice, playwork does operate in a variety of settings including childcare, adventure playground, open access play ranging, and specific projects to support disabled children and young people. The purpose of playwork may vary, however as reflected in Playwork Principle No 2 (PPSG, 2005), supporting the play process of children's play is a commonality shared on the approach to playwork practice across the various play provisions. Another shared aspect is being able to be versatile and adapt practice to any change in circumstance. Where playwork provision had to stop and staff being furloughed, it became evident for some their playwork practice was able to continue with their own children, where one participant observed on their own children: "I've seen a massive change in them from being cooped up you know, massive change in their emotional behaviour and the way they approach things" (Interview 18). Playwork has been described in having a compensatory role (Brown & Webb, 2002) for children who are unable to access space to play. The lockdown made all outdoor space inaccessible to children, as reflected in this comment, however it was demonstrated within this study that the compensatory role of playwork took on a more outreach service.

For children who are either current key workers children or identified as vulnerable, they have benefited in some aspect of playwork practice. For some, this has been a new experience; however, the approach to play adopted by playwork and playworkers to support the process of play and let children take the lead, has enabled those new to this type of play approach to quickly adapt to it themselves. For the two established play teams in different

parts of the UK, this has enabled staff to not only continue to work, but work face to face with children and young people and supporting them in their play. For those key working children and vulnerable children who were already using a provision, this enabled some consistency in their lives, for example as Interview 20 explained “The children’s center on the other hand which is a 48 place nursery has been open throughout the whole crisis because where a third of our children are vulnerable and considered vulnerable and a third are key worker families”. For those key working or vulnerable children who had not used a playwork provision before, the approach to focusing on the process of play enabled them to settle in very quickly. Howard (2020) when reflecting on their playwork practice identifies focusing on the process will be key as they state:

When returning to direct contact, the playwork practitioner must have an awareness of the process of play and its therapeutic benefits for maintaining wellbeing for all (p. 7).

This again reflects the compensatory aspect of the purpose of playwork by providing the space and opportunities for children to play. One example of how this was put into practice was in Japan where the use of adventure playgrounds provided space and opportunities for children and young who experienced earthquakes and Tsunami to play (Kinoshita & Woolley, 2015). Another example where the process of play was used to support children in Romanian orphanages (Brown & Webb, 2002). These two examples show how the purpose of playwork can support children experiencing adversity due to the adaptable and versatile nature of playwork supporting the process of play, as well as being able to form relationships. All these factors were identified by playworkers as important within this study. However, this does not only relate to playwork specific provision such as adventure playgrounds but also other spaces children play such as afterschool clubs, holiday playschemes and during

recess time in the school playground. This focus on play may be a role playwork and playworkers, with their adaptable and versatile approach to play, can help schools in supporting children in their play after spending months in lockdown. From this study, there was evidence this was happening already where one play provision has been working with two-thirds of their local schools:

“The headteachers have been so won over by the approach, to varying degrees, they see what we do as more important to them to what they do in the classroom also to the point where some headteachers go outside, they’ve seen the impact on what a playwork approach can have” (Interview 22).

The work playworkers are already doing in the current hubs, along with the playwork in school provision with before and after school clubs already taking place, could continue once lockdown ends and current restrictions are reduced. Every participant in this study referred to the concerns on how children will react to the lockdown, and how play will be so much more important in their lives indicating possibly more emphasis on the compensatory role of playwork. This links back to the original research question on whether playworkers could be key workers (King, 2020). From this study, there is a ready-made workforce that can support children in a range of communities and contexts, however, there needs funding to be made available to facilitate this to happen.

This study was undertaken at the start of the UK lockdown and provides a snapshot of how playwork was affected. However, with children being allowed back in schools and the opening up of public playgrounds, further studies are needed on how play and playwork practice managed both pre- and post-lockdown.). One limitation of this study was the

analysis did not include a member check on the themes (Shenton, 2004) for either the purpose of playwork and how lockdown impacted on playwork. However, the themes generated from the purpose of playwork do indicate transferability between the published playwork literature and the findings from this study (Shenton, 2004).

Playwork and playworkers have been affected by the COVID-19, as with everybody else. However, their role in supporting children and young people after the lockdown could be utilized in their adaptable and versatile approach to play.

Conclusion

This study considered what playworkers thought is the purpose of playwork and how playwork has been affected by COVID-19. The purpose of playwork is reflected in their playworker role of being an advocate for play, be compensatory or facilitate play, particularly in a therapeutic capacity. Each of these purposes have 'worth', one is not necessarily more important than the other, however as children return to outdoor spaces where they can play, the compensatory and facilitation purpose of playwork may be of more importance where playworkers can show their adaptability and versatility to support children's play. The way playwork has been affected by the COVID-19 lockdown can be placed on a continuum of no playwork practice to running the school hubs. Again, this shows the adaptable and versatile nature of how playwork operates, and this could be put to greater use when children return to school and other outdoor spaces in the local communities. The relationships playworkers had developed with the children, parents, and carers and the community was important to maintain, even if the playwork provision had stopped. Playwork has a lot to offer once lockdown is lifted; however, funding needs to be made available to support the playwork in

adventure playgrounds, open access play ranger projects, and school-based before and after school provision.

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