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Can Playwork Have a Key Working Role?

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Abstract

This study interviewed 23 people currently involved in playwork which included face-to-face playwork practitioners, playworkers who are more involved in the development and management of specific projects or settings, playwork trainers and those working more at strategic director-level. All participants were asked to consider if playwork can have a key working role and how it will operate once the lockdown from COVID-19 has been relaxed. Analysing the 23 interviews through thematic analysis, the understanding of key working fell into three groups: 1) UK Government Response to the current COVID-19 pandemic; 2) health and well-being of people; and 3) supporting individual people. In relation to whether playwork has a key work role, most respondents beliefs fall into three categories: 1) supporting the Government Key Workers in the current situation by providing childcare; 2) using a distinct playwork approach to play; and 3) developing positive relationships with children, young people and families in the communities where the playwork provision is served. The aspects of a Playwork Approach and Developing Relationships reflect the concerns that when lockdown is reduced, playwork and playworkers will need to develop their therapeutic skills when supporting children's play and adapt their playwork approach to both their own provision and potentially to support other provisions such as schools.

Key Words: Key Working; Playwork; Therapeutic; COVID-19

Introduction

In March 2020, the UK Government as a response to the lockdown to try and control the spread of COVID-19 published on their website a list of key working services (UK Government, 2020). For the most part, services and provisions for children and young people were closed entirely, or a very much reduced service was provided. Education and childcare were considered to be key working roles to care for the children of key working parents. This was then extended so that vulnerable children could also be cared for whilst parents and carers worked. The closure of play provision has had an impact on playwork being delivered (King, in progress).

This paper forms the second part of a three-month study on how COVID-19 has had an impact on playwork and playworkers. This includes adventure playgrounds, before and after-school clubs, wraparound provision and open access projects in their local parks and communities. The focus of the study was a response to a playworker posting on a playwork social media page: “Can playwork be considered as a key working role?”. This paper is a response to the question, including a consideration of how playwork can operate once the lockdown has been lifted, or at least reduced.

Background to the study

In January 2020, the World Health Organisations (WHO) named a new β -coronavirus as SARS-CoV-2, or COVID19 (Guo et al., 2020). From the original outbreak in Wuhan, China COVID19 has now spread globally. COVID-19 is passed by human-to-human transmission and can result in fever, cough, fatigue and gastrointestinal infection (Guo et al., 2020). The rapid spread of COVID19 across the world resulted in the United Kingdom (UK) initially recommending the self-isolation 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 (Dickson, 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” (GOV.UK, 2020).

Holt and Kirwain (2012) stated the role of the key worker “is open to interpretation and may potentially overlap with the role of other key professionals” (p. 379). For example, in residential care, the key worker “would have full responsibility, including decision making, for the care of a service user admitted to a residential establishment” (McKellar & Kendrick, 2013), whilst in family support, the key worker can “act as a single point of contact for the families, key workers also act as a point of contact for the professionals and workers

across a range of agencies” (Carter & Thomas, 2011, p. 2). Cahill et al. (2016) stated that key working is “founded on the idea that human relationships are of paramount importance and a fundamental need for human beings” (p. 216). Thus, the key worker needs to be sensitive, empathetic, warm, genuine and able to coordinate and serve as the focal contact person in order to make key decisions and develop trusting, quality relationships (Cahill et al., 2016; Carter & Thomas, 2011; Holt & Kirwain, 2012; McKellar & Kendrick, 2013; Rodriguez & King, 2014).

In an online discussion forum, an interesting question was raised: “Should playworkers be considered as key workers?”. The question posed an interesting definitional problem because playworkers are not residential care workers or teachers and do not consider themselves as childcare workers, although they often work in childcare settings (King, 2020). Outside of childcare, playwork can take place in diverse environments such as adventure playgrounds (Hughes, 1975) and open spaces like parks and public green spaces (King & Sills-Jones, 2015), as well as in before and after school clubs (Smith & Barker, 2000).

For many children and young people, the opportunity to play on an adventure playground or in their own local parks and open spaces facilitated by playworkers may be the only ‘quality space’ to play outside of education, childcare and their home environment. As Whitebread et al. (2012) stated, “there is very clear evidence that children’s cognitive development and emotional well-being are related to the quality of their play” (p. 28). However, Lester (2016) wrote, “while the evidence in support of the value of children’s play is compelling, there is much less evidence that captures the value of playwork” (p. 5). The lack of recognition of what it is playworkers do presents a concern for the playwork profession (King, 2015).

Children and young people who regularly attend an adventure playground or attend an open access play session in their local community develop relationships with the playworkers. This is where, potentially, playworkers may have a key working role, as “the daily contact with the service user enables the key worker to develop an extensive and detailed knowledge of the service user and their needs” (McKellar & Kendrick, 2013, p. 48). Although some form of playwork during the lockdown period has taken place within communities or in the hubs where key working and vulnerable children attend (King, in progress), the fact that playwork often involves working with large numbers of children and young people, the strict ‘stay at home’ or if you do go out ‘stay 2m apart’ policies have resulted in many adventure playgrounds staying closed and mobile playworkers not working. How playworkers perceive their role as key workers and how playwork will operate once restrictions have been lifted are addressed in remainder of this paper.

Methodology

This study was granted ethical approval from the College of Human and Health Sciences Ethics Committee, Swansea University. Participants were invited to take part in the study using Twitter® and the playwork specific Facebook® pages. 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.

Participants

Twenty three participants took part in the study. Their role in playwork reflected the diversity of playwork practice (Bonel & Lindon, 1996), including face-to-face practitioners at both the playworker and senior playworker level, play development and management of specific projects, settings and/or playwork training and strategic director-level supervision. Participants worked in the statutory, third (voluntary) and business sectors, and in some instances their role crossed over between sectors. Funding ranged from Local Authority funding, either their own play service or provided funds for the third sector, other third sector funding or from national bodies such as Children in Need and the BIG Lottery Fund. Often, play provision in the third sector funding for services was obtained from all three of these sources and individual benefactors.

The diversity of the participants' role in playwork was also reflected in the types of provision. These included adventure playground, after school clubs, holiday playschemes, wraparound provision and national organisations, as well as open access play ranging. Participants who have a management role are responsible for 5-6 people, 40-60 people and up to 270 people. This includes both paid full time and part time staff, sessional staff and volunteers. The number of children attending the different types of provision on a weekly basis ranged from 500 to 1000.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken because they enable the use of an interview guide where a “written list of questions and topics are covered in a particular order” (Bernard, 2013, p.182) as do structured interviews, although semi-structured interviews allow “the freewheeling quality of unstructured interviews” (Bernard, 2013, p. 182). The interview script included three specific questions which form the focus of this paper:

- What do you consider to be the important factors that contribute to key working?
- How do you think playwork could be considered to be a key working role?
- How will playwork practice operate after restrictions have been lifted?

All interviews were undertaken remotely using the Zoom® platform. This enabled a face-to-face interview to be undertaken and the ability to record for transcription and analysis while abiding to the Government lock down restrictions. Prior to any interview beginning, participants were reminded of the purpose of the study, informed consent and the right to withdraw at any time.

Zoom® video recordings were later transcribed into a Microsoft Word® document and then uploaded into the Nvivo 12® software package for analysis. All the transcriptions were undertaken by listening back to each interview to ensure that what each participant had said was recorded accurately. Transcription packages were avoided as it is important in qualitative research to ‘immerse’ yourself in the data (Green et al., 2007). Listening back and re-winding sections to ensure word accuracy also enables listening and re-listening to derive meaning from the comments.

The data were analysed using the thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This is a six-step process which involved the reading and re-reading of the interview to further immerse oneself in the data (Green et al., 2007) and to identify initial codes which were then grouped into themes (a process in qualitative research called ‘collapsing the data’ (Elliot, 2018)). Data analysis was started after interview 16 because at

this point no new initial codes or themes emerged, suggesting the data had reached saturation point (Saunders et al., 2017).

Results

The themes developed as key factors in Key Working and Whether Playwork Could be Considered as a Key Working Role were reflected in specific quotations from over 20 of the 23 participants across the range of playwork roles (practice, development and strategic) and playwork provision (adventure playground, after school club and open access). However, to maintain participants' confidentiality, only the interview number, role and provision type are provided for each direct quote in this paper.

Key Factors in Key Working

When asked about “what do you consider to be the important factors that contribute to key working?”, the responses were mixed within three broad categories:

- Key working associated with the current COVID-19 situation and those designated by the UK Government
- Key working associated to health and wellbeing
- Key working associated with providing care to an individual

Key Working Associated with the Current COVID-19 Situation as Designated by the UK Government. The important factors associated with key working were often associated with the list of essential services of commerce and the ‘blue light’ emergency services.

“So, at the moment, it is anything that is coping with the COVID-19 response isn’t it? That is what is considered to be a key worker. You either are or you’re not by the government’s own definition I guess” (Interview 10, Manager of afterschool and holiday club).

“It certainly changed who we look at, delivery drivers, bin men being classed as key workers. Where before they were pushed quite low down the chain” (Interview 17, Senior Playworker on an adventure playground).

“The important factors with regards to the key workers and key working are obviously front-line staff, people who are saving lives. You’ve then got your second tier then, people who are stocking the shelves, again making sure the food and everything ticks over” (Interview 18, Manager of area wrap around play company).

Thus, key working here clearly pertains to keeping commerce running, supplying essential food and supplies and enabling all the essential services (police, ambulance, fire) to keep running.

Key working Associated to Health and Wellbeing. Key factors associated to key working here was more specially related to people’s health and well-being:

“Key working is about ensuring somebody’s well-being” (Interview 2, Manager of local play organisation).

“I think with key worker, is moving more towards critical worker ... so I think critical workers would be our medical staff that are trying to advise on infection control and support, treat people and possibly save lives” (Interview 6, Officer for National Play Organisation).

“I suppose taking initially from what we are getting from the media and the Government and all that kind of thing, it is the fundamental basic things to keep things going and in the first few weeks that was very much physical health professionals, people manning the phonedlines and um fire engines, ambulances, police; what you all consider the emergency stuff, but now as time goes on and we start to hear more about keeping people’s mental health as well as their physical health, you know in a good condition...” (Interview 7, Play Services Manager for a small charity).

The participants relate key working specifically to the maintenance and support of people’s health and their well-being. This involves predominately the frontline services, the doctors and nurses whose role prior to COVID-19 was taking care of people’s physical and mental health.

Key working Associated with Care to an Individual. The response to factors of key working resulted in more personal explanations, both in relation to their current role and from experience with their own families, or related specifically to their current playwork practice where 1:1 support is needed with the children and young people who use the provision:

“Key worker is the person who takes the lead for the care of the child or family” (Interview 1, Manager of a local play organisation).

“You have that thing where particular clients in a profession were assigned to a named person they were looking after particularly” (Interview 9, freelance playworker).

“Key working is an interesting concept. From my understanding of what key working is, it’s about ensuring certain children have greater attention focused on them and for the child to be able to have a specific point of contact of someone they would go to” (Interview 23, playworker and playwork trainer).

According to the participants, play provision that offers specific, specialised support to individuals or individual families (a description also reflected in the literature (Carter & Thomas, 2011)), defines this kind of key working.

Thus, emerging from the analysis of the playworkers’ responses is a view of key working from three distinct perspectives: 1) a response to the current COVID-19 situation; 2) the maintenance of health and well-being of everyone and 3) an individual focus. The need to reconsider just what is the full breadth of the meaning of key working is summarised in the following comment:

“I think that notion of key worker maybe needs to change, to what is actually key to keeping everybody getting to the end of this in a state where we can just

go back to what we were doing” (Interview 7, Play Services Manager for a small charity).

Key Factors in Playwork as a Key Working Role

The role of the keyworker and who is now determined as a key worker has changed since the COVID-19 outbreak. With education and childcare being considered key working roles, particularly to support key working parents and carers childcare during the closure of schools, childcare provision, open access provision (adventure playground) and local parks and open spaces provision, could playworkers be considered as having a key working role?

From the thematic analysis to the question, “How Could Playwork be Considered as a Key Working Role?”, three broad ideas formed:

- Supporting Government Key Workers
- A Playwork Approach
- Relationships

Playwork supporting Government Key Workers. This key working role of playwork was felt important for most of the participants. For one playworker who manages an out of school provision in a school, the after school club was kept running (as a business) as it was situated within the hub of the school. It provided a place for the key working and vulnerable children to remain after the hub had finished for the day without charge to the parents or carers:

“If we weren’t open the doctors and nurses in hospitals for example would have to finish earlier to be able to pick their children up. So, I feel we are in the childcare portion of what we do” (Interview 10, Manager of afterschool and holiday club).

However, as pointed out by three school-based playwork providers, as businesses they were running at a loss, and not all were able to continue to run to support the key working and vulnerable children for free:

“When they decided to open the schools, they should have looked at how the after school clubs could continue to be open and to offer the parents who themselves are key workers and are fine during the day when the children are going to school during the day free of charge, and then it’s not fair we’ve got to pay to send them to after school club” (Interview 19, Manager for school-based after school and holiday club).

“My understanding was that within education, key workers is about providing somewhere safe for children of key workers. And the staff who are working in those contexts would be key workers. As with the back of the beginning of March as things were heating up with the virus, I was talking with a school about sending a team of playworkers in to work with the children instead of the teachers having to do that” (Interview 23, playworker and playwork trainer).

This opportunity for playworkers to support the hubs, but not being taken up was also stated by two other participants. However, King (in progress) has shown that playworkers running the hubs supporting key working and vulnerable children are clearly fulfilling a key working role at this current time.

A Playwork Approach. Where playworkers were working in the hubs, and in particular playing an active rather than a supportive role, one common phrase that was constantly referred to was ‘a playwork approach’:

“Are you saying open access play is what playwork is and that is how it’s defined as a key working role? Or adventure playground playwork is a key working role? Or are you talking about playwork as an approach, because there are people working in education and childcare, there are people in health who’ve got playwork qualifications, who are doing keywork, who are using a playwork approach in their work and very explicitly fit into that key worker role” (Interview 13, Workforce Development Officer for a national play organisation).

“If playworkers were working in these hubs with these children, they’ve got a different approach to teachers, they’re that alternative adult” (Interview 18, Manager of area wrap around play company).

“I think it’s the facilitation of play that is essential, what skills allow our playworkers to do that I suppose it’s knowledge of play, a lot of ways and techniques to support that to happen” (Interview 7, Play Services Manager for a small charity).

Although there is still much debate about what is a playwork approach (Newstead, 2019), the Playwork Principles (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group (PPSG), 2005) which underpin professional playwork practice state that playwork supports the process of children's play. This consideration of the playwork approach as a supportive role in children's 'freely-chosen and intrinsically motivated' play (Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), 2002) occurs in everyday playwork practice, and this leads into the final theme which was about developing relationships.

Developing Relationships. This aspect of forming relationships was not just about those that develop between playworkers and children, but also between playworkers and parents. This was evident in the comments from playworkers across the different types of playwork provision and illustrated in the following comments:

“It's just that sort of relationship that you build up over time. Our kids that usually attend the family centre, they always go around and hug the staff before they leave and I've seen kids leave and come back because they missed a member of staff to give them a hug and stuff like that” (Interview 15, Manager for a childcare setting).

“It is about those relationships and I'm thinking it could be a key working role because of the incredible gap that is opening with children who particularly need support and not taking up the offer of the school bit” (Interview 16, Manager and playworker for a local open access play organisation).

“The part we play in the child’s life not only while they are on the playground being role models, being important people in their lives, it’s also the support we provide their families. Our playground manager has been here 35 years and seen generations of families and plays a vital part in their lives” (Interview 17, Senior Playworker on an adventure playground).

The integral part playwork provision has within communities, in both open access adventure playground and play ranging projects as well as closed access childcare type provision, is about developing those important relationships with both the children and families and reflects playwork’s establishment as a key working role in the literature (Cahill et al., 2016). This relationship for some families extends beyond play provision, in particular adventure playgrounds continuing or starting food banks, which one respondent referred to as “playwork plus” (Interview 23, playworker and playwork trainer). This is key work done beyond the purpose stated in the Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005), that playwork supports children’s play.

However, although all participants felt playworkers could have a key working role, participants also felt that the lack of value and understanding of playwork meant that it would never be viewed as one:

“I don’t see how playwork can ever fit into a key working role. I wish I thought it could, but I don’t ever see it being a priority for anyone except us. Wish there was a way I could think of to make it a priority” (Interview 11, Manager and playworker for frontline services).

“In the current form we are specifically, it would be hard to argue that we would be key workers, as we are saying we’re not necessarily doing childcare, we want to circumvent that” (Interview 12, Play Manager for an adventure playground).

“In relation to playwork being keywork, I just feel it’s just being unrealistic. We’ve just witnessed a complete annihilation of play services across the whole country as this government has decided the focus was on attainment and I’m really hopeful when we come out of these things may change” (Interview 20, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a national play organisation).

“I guess in this language a key worker is an individual who fulfills a role that entails that society continues to function. If that’s the case, playworkers should definitely not be key workers because we shouldn’t, I’m of the school of thought who believes we shouldn’t need playworkers because children should have the freedom to play wherever they want to be able to want to play” (Interview 23, playworker and playwork trainer).

This last point about ‘not needing playworkers’ was a point raised by other participants in the study. It is not that any of them are de-valuing playwork and playworkers. It is their recognition that playworkers are needed because, unfortunately, there has been a decrease in space and time for play within and outside children’s local communities. This belief reflects the mindset of playwork having a compensatory role (Hughes, 2003).

Playwork After Lockdown

When asked how playwork practice will operate after restrictions have been lifted, there was a genuine urge from all participants that this would happen soon, summed up in the following quote:

“As soon as we are allowed to, as soon as CIW (Care Inspectorate of Wales) say we can, soon as our education department and government says we can, we will” (Interview 4, Play Development Worker for a local authority).

However, as much as a ‘return to normal’ was the ideal, once lockdown was restricted, or at worse reduced, three main themes on how playwork practice would be able to continue emerged from the data:

- Reduced or no Playwork Provision
- Develop New Methods to Deliver Playwork
- More Therapeutic Role is Needed

Reduced or no Playwork Provision. The worst-case scenario was that playwork practice would not be able to continue:

“I would sense that people will be absolutely delighted to go back into the local parks and play with freedom. I suspect that is not going to happen any time soon. I fear for us to be able to deliver anything over the summer in terms of open access play” (Interview 16, Manager and playworker for a local open access play organisation).

Where playworkers may be able to work again when restrictions may be lifted, social distancing where people must stay 2m (6 feet) apart would be impossible in relation to how children play:

“How do the children understand social distancing? How do you play within social distancing as well? For me personally, I’m really unsure on what time of time-scale we will be back opening and operating in this normal, or new normal or whatever we want to call it so I’m not too sure” (Interview 17, Senior Playworker for an adventure playground).

“If social distancing continues, well I don’t see how that could work, and not stay within the guidance and not to remain true to itself, in order to enforce 2m between non-familial groups, you’re going to have to be putting in strategies and be directive to the children, where I can spend the whole session and never talk to a child if I’m being a true playworker. We end up, social distancing means we have to intervene. If we have to intervene, we are interfering into the child’s play. If we are interfering with the child’s play, that has a fundamental effect and changes the child’s play. If we’re changing the child’s play, we’re not playworkers” (Interview 23, playworker and playwork trainer).

The issue of social distancing, such as a French school resorting to painting squares 2m apart in the school playground (Roach, 2020), can potentially have an impact on the quality of play (Whitebread et al. 2012). Whilst being able to apply social distancing was considered a difficult issue to overcome, another issue of major concern was around funding

and the money available after the COVID-19 pandemic is over. This worry of funding was felt by playworkers working in both the third (voluntary) sector and those who run after school provision as a business:

“I worry about the funding for places; is there going to be the money and the support to offer that the way we used to be so I’m not entirely sure. I mean I don’t know how long we can survive as an organisation if nothing else opens sort of thing. Will people want to go back to the 9 to 5 normal working day and stuff like that. I suppose I’m looking at it from two different angles of playwork and childcare” (Interview 15, Manager for a childcare setting).

“I think it will be dependent on how our finances are at the moment because we are a charity, we rely on so much funding and fundraising and because of a lot of council depends, we had to, we are now estimated to have a shortfall of £150,000, so if we don’t get that there is talk that a lot of our schemes will close because we won’t be able to fund them” (Interview 3, playworker).

This issue of funding was a concern for playwork prior to COVID-19 (McKendrick & Martin, 2015). However, the financial implications of lockdown has raised a worry in relation to whether local authorities who were providing grants would be able to continue to do so. Likewise, for out of school provision in schools, it cannot be guaranteed that furloughed parents would have jobs to go back to.

Develop New Methods to Deliver Playwork. The hope to get back to some form of playwork delivery was expressed by all participants in the study, but with the realisation that

it may not be as it was prior to the lockdown. For example, social distancing and anticipated reduced numbers was highlighted in this comment:

“At the moment, my club operates from an old mobile which we lease from the council. Now that’s measured to take 24 children, but actually I think 24 children will probably be too many on returning. We need to space them out even more and we might be able to use our outdoor classroom going into the summer months. But certainly, we will have less in I think” (Interview 19, Manager for school-based after school and holiday club).

Whilst some playworkers were still able to work within their play provision, for others the lockdown meant working remotely from home. For play related projects supporting children and young people with specific needs and requirements, this remote working would need to continue:

“How it’s going to change us, I think it’s going to change perhaps how we work in the office. We’ve developed this coordinated approach so we can all work remotely but work together” (Interview 1, Manager of a local play organisation).

The need to make changes in working practices was also identified by a national organisation with over 60 paid staff:

“My role is going to be a lot more balanced. I sort of run the HR as well, so my role is going to be a lot more balanced with regards to, so rather than going

and running workshops and doing all fun things, it's going to be more support. Support to the playleaders, support to playworkers in order to sort of get us back, get all the wheels moving and then to progress you know" (Interview 18, Manager of area wrap around play company).

These comments indicate that the return to playwork practice from lockdown must consider more than the children and young people who receive play provision or the families in the communities playwork providers support. Return must ensure that the staff are prepared and supported as well.

For some playwork provision, opportunities to support schools has already been considered. For example, three adventure playgrounds already have strong links with the local schools by offering an alternative education provision or providing space for children to play and learn during the school hours. The use of other adventure playgrounds may increase during school hours, in addition to evening and weekends:

"We've had schools wanting to book us in. Normally a class would come to us from a school once a week, they are now asking if they can come twice a week. We've had a number of schools asking for that. We've had schools asking us for training so they can do stuff on site with the kids" (Interview 22, Director and playworker for an adventure playground).

Where playworkers are currently working in the school hubs, there is an anticipation this will continue:

“I would like to think we will be running some kind of provision for the summer. I envision a lot more support from schools, schools wanting to use us more. Even though we are in certain schools, there’s feedback we have from teachers it has put playwork higher up” (Interview 5, Manager of a local authority play service).

The one aspect of playwork and playwork practice which has emerged from this study is how as a profession it must be both adaptable and flexible, and is summed up in the following comment:

“I think that flexibility, we talk about what playing is for children in terms of building resilience and flexibility, creativity and so then as a sector we’ve got to, we are a resilient sector and some of the things I’ve seen people doing, although some of the purists may say that’s not playwork, I think it’s showing you’re actually quite resilient, you’re not giving in on it. You’re absolutely committed to ensure children are playing where and when they can” (Interview 6, Officer for National Play Organisation).

More Therapeutic Approach. The theme mentioned most in the interviews was a genuine worry about how children and the families within the communities will cope after being in lockdown. With reference to the importance of developing relationships with the children, young people, and the families in the community, it was commented:

“I know who I see every Monday, every Thursday. I know who comes in when and I’ve passed the mums when I go out for my daily power walking.

They say ‘I’m missing you’ I do miss the interaction with the families”
(Interview 8, Manager for wrap around provision based in a school).

“We are going to have to spend some time building relationships again. I think that’s going to be really important. There are going to be big gaps missed with a sense of a lot of children not being able to play” (Interview 17, Senior Playworker on an adventure playground).

The fact that children have not been able to play within playwork provision, whether it is an adventure playground, the park or their out of school club, there was a clear worry around children’s anxiety:

“What might change is the needs of the children because there is the potential for a loss of bereavement, of emotional damage; things we can’t predict just yet that might impact the children and what they might be going through at home. We don’t know what poverty they might be facing, the stress the family might be going under at home and what we might be scooping up and dealing with when the children come back to us” (Interview 10, Manager of afterschool and holiday club).

“I’ve only got two children who one can express themselves fully. 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, Manager of area wrap around play company).

This worry about how children will play, or potentially play, out their lockdown experiences means staff must be prepared to support children who may have varying experiences:

“I’m trying to get playworkers to think more of the therapeutic benefits of play. I’ve done a lot of work on this, I trained as a play therapist. I’m a qualified play therapist, but decided I wanted to notch it down one into therapeutic playwork. We are positioned between community playwork and play therapy, so we call it play nurture” (Interview 16, Manager and playworker for a local open access play organisation).

“Once the restrictions have been lifted, hopefully we can operate back to a similar way, but we’ve had lots of discussions; people are very worried specifically around mental health and trying to deal with trauma as we know incidents of domestic violence etc. are on the increase. So when we do go back to normal there’s going to be an element of kids who are dealing with that who we will have to support” (Interview 12, Play Manager for an adventure playground).

This aspect of genuine worry and concern was echoed throughout each of the 23 interviews, not only for the children and young people who already use the provision, but also for others who have not. Many of the interviewees made reference to how worried they were for the children and young people they saw each week and then suddenly, and without warning, provision stopped.

Results Summary

- When asked what the important aspects of key working are, three main themes emerged: 1) key working associated with the current COVID-19 situation and those designated by the UK Government; 2) health and wellbeing and 3) providing care to an individual.
- When asked if playwork could be considered a key working role, three themes emerged: 1) supporting government key workers; 2) a playwork approach and 3) relationships. The playwork approach and relationships also reflected the important aspects of key working to health and wellbeing and care for an individual.
- When asked how playwork practice could operate once lockdown restrictions have been lifted, there was both optimism and pessimism from the responses reflected in the three themes: 1) reduced or no playwork provision; 2) develop new methods to deliver playwork and 3) more therapeutic role needed.

Discussion

The question posed “Can playwork be considered a key working role?” provided the opportunity not only for this study to be undertaken, but offered a reflective consideration of what playwork does and can offer. Being reflective is an important aspect of playwork practice (King & Newstead, 2017; Kilvington & Wood, 2010) and this period of lockdown has enabled playwork as a profession to have a period of reflection. This also provided the opportunity to collect the lived experience of the ‘here and now’ and in time this study could be an important historical account of playwork during the COVID-19 outbreak. This is why it was important in the presentation of the results to include the relevant comments from the participants.

The response to whether playwork could be considered a key working role was predominately positive. However, this was based on the context and interpretation of key working. From the perspective of the response to COVID-19 and the lockdown, the role of playwork could not be considered 'key' as it does not contribute to running the economy (commerce) or provide life-saving or medical support. However, the support of these key working services or roles offered what could be considered a 'secondary key working role', where facilitating the space for play in the hubs, for example, enabled key workers to work whilst their children were supported in their play. This study identified links between playwork provision and school that were already in place prior to the lockdown with local adventure playgrounds, as well as with out of school provision run in schools. With the current debate about whether primary school children should start back at school, it has been proposed that the focus should be on children playing with their peers (Weale, 2020). Playwork and playworkers can support this and it may be that schools should link with local playwork provision to enable this to happen.

It is hoped that when children do return to schools and other provision they use, money can be made available to support not only the vulnerable children, but any child who may have had a negative experience during lockdown. There was an overwhelming feeling that playwork can support children in facilitating play environments for children to engage in their self-directed play, with playworkers supporting them as outlined in the Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005). The money could be made available through other services. One playworker talked about the links with their local (CAHMS) in being able to support certain children:

“We contacted CAHMS and we are thinking we may be able to deliver 1:1, we’ve been asked to do 1:1 services as a therapeutic means starting yesterday, unfortunately it got cancelled as the kid could not make it down” (Interview 22, Director of local play organisation).

Although playworkers are not employed as play therapists or qualified counsellors, it is recognised how playwork can have a therapeutic role (King & Temple, 2018; Sturrock & Else, 1998; Webb & Brown, 2003), where the playworker can help provide the space for children to be able to play how they want to play and for whatever reason. This may be purely for their own enjoyment, or play could be used by the child as a mechanism to try and understand past experiences, such as being in lockdown for a period of time and not leaving the house. This approach to play in playwork reflects the concern that many children will need their local play space when lockdown ends (whether this is an adventure playground, their park or out of school club), as they may have many questions and issues they need to play out. This also reflects the consideration of how playwork could be a key working role as it is about the relationships playworkers develop with children and families, which is recognised as one important aspect of key working (Cahill et al., 2016).

When asked how playwork will continue after the lockdown, it was clear from the 23 interviews there will be a need for playwork provision to continue to show its adaptability and versatility, such as changing the way that playwork is undertaken in their own provision or developing more outreach work. However, the change in playwork practice may come with a financial cost. When playworkers in services not under local authority provision (such as the third (voluntary) or business sector) do return to work, their skills to support children’s play and develop relationships with the children and families may prove invaluable.

Playwork can and does have a key working role and could, or should, be utilised in the varying contexts where children play. However, even before the COVID-19 outbreak, the funding of playwork provision has been and remains to be a barrier to playwork practice. Funding that may become available post the COVID-19 lockdown could be diverted to an existing versatile and adaptable workforce, including those in playwork.

Conclusion

Playwork can be considered as a key working role to support existing Government Key Workers. This could be undertaken by developing relationships with children using the playwork approach to play. This playwork approach, with its ability to be versatile and flexible, will be required to develop new methods to deliver playwork where a more therapeutic role will be needed when children leave lockdown. The importance of this study to playwork and playworkers is that it was undertaken in the ‘here and now’ and captures a moment in history that is unprecedented, where adults, children and young people have been in lockdown at this time of writing for nearly three months. As a key working role is primarily to keep the economy going or save lives, playwork can have a secondary role in supporting those who work in shops or residential care or part of the ‘blue light’ emergency services. As a role to support communities, families and individual children and young people, there is a case to be argued that playwork has played and can continue to play a key working role in frontline service supporting children’s play, or as one participant put it, providing ‘playwork plus’, where basic needs such as food becomes part of playwork practice. What playwork and playworkers can also offer is support to other professions, including the teaching profession, to support children’s play as they leave lockdown.

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